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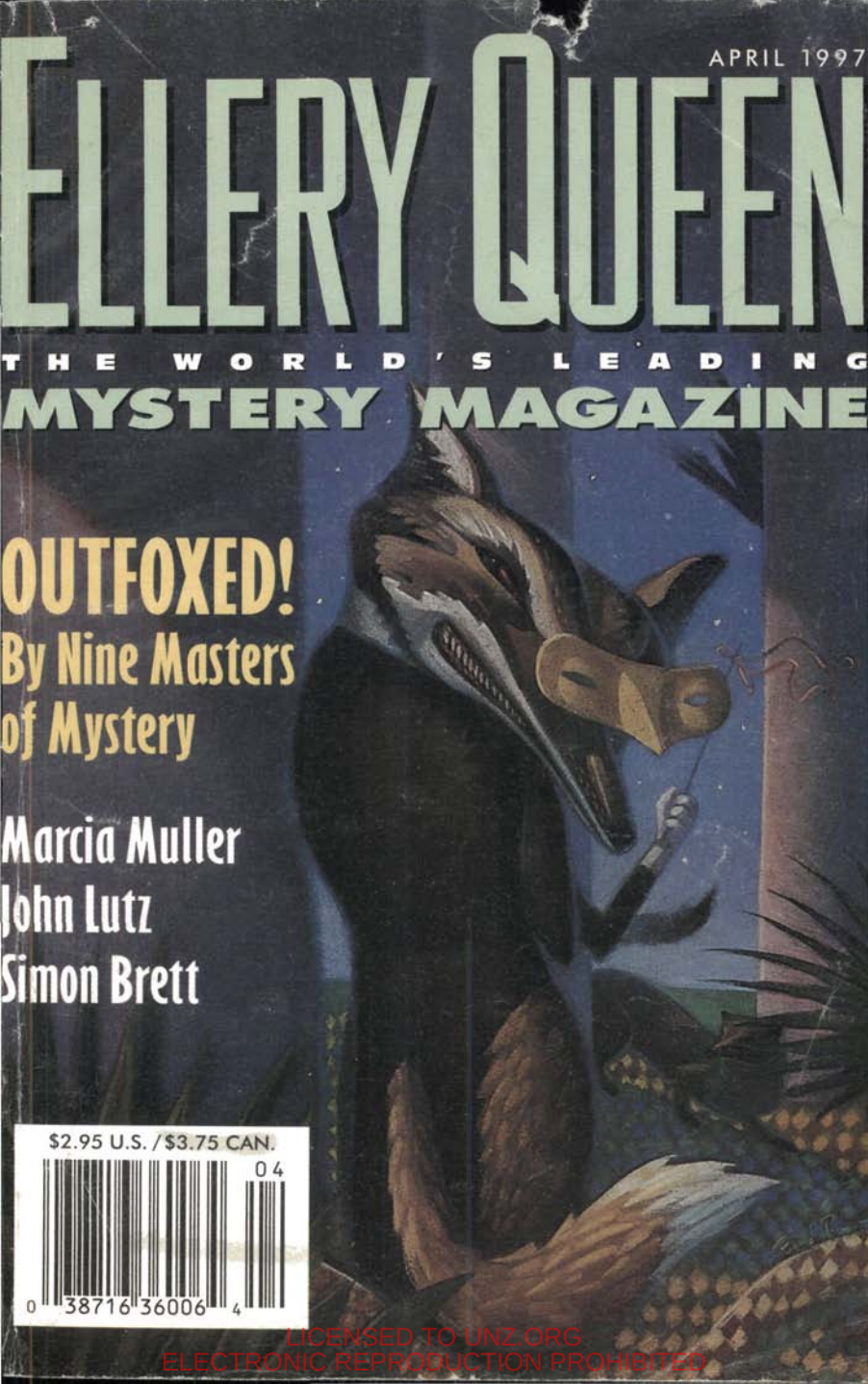

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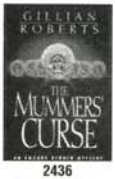

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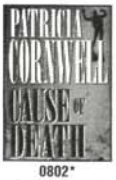

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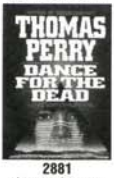

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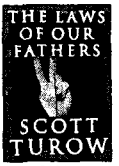

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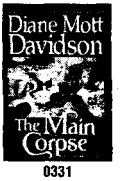

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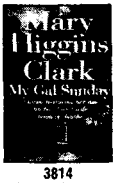

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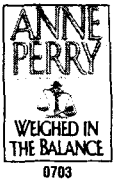

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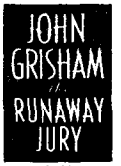

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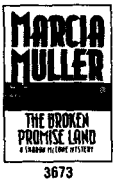

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CONTENTS

Treacherous waters
Page 40

Death on the levee
Page 134

Cover Illustration by
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Note: indicia on
page 158

FICTION

Solo BY MARCIA MULLER 4

Political Corrections BY SIMON BRETT 18

Night Crawlers BY JOHN LUTZ 40

The Case of the Easter Bonnet
BY PETER LOVESEY 60

The Problem of the Enchanted Terrace
BY EDWARD D. HOCH 66

Holiday Patrol
BY JANWILLEM VAN DE WETERING 82

Shifter BY SUZANNE JONES 98

Kendra BY D. A. MCGUIRE 113

The Mystery of Rochelle Marais
BY O'NEIL DE NOUX 134

REVIEWS

The Jury Box BY JON L. BREEN 63

POETRY

BOMBS AWAY
BY ROSE-MARIE P. BURNS 17

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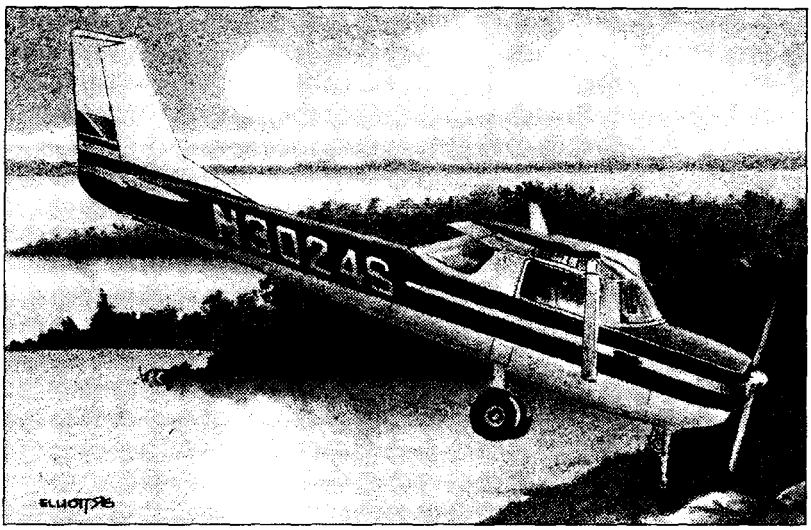

Art by Darryl Elliott

SOLO

by Marcia Muller

"That's where it happened."

Hy put the Citabria into a gliding turn and we spiraled down to a few hundred feet above Tufa Lake. Its water looked teal blue today; the small islands and gnarled towers of calcified vegetation stood out in gray and taupe relief. A wind from the east riffled the lake's surface. Except for a blackened area on the south side of Plover Island, I saw no sign that a light plane had crashed and burned there.

I turned my head from the window and looked into the forward part of the cockpit; Hy Ripinsky, my best friend and longtime lover, still stared at the scene below, his craggy face set in grim lines. After a few seconds he shook his head and turned his attention back to the controls, putting on full throttle and pulling back on the stick. The small plane rose and angled in for the airport on the lake's northwest shore.

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Through our dual headsets Hy said, "Dammit, McCone, I'm a good flight instructor, and Scott Oakley was a good student. There's no reason he should've strayed from the pattern and crashed on his first solo flight."

We were entering that same pattern, on the downwind leg for runway two-seven. I waited till Hy had announced our position to other traffic on the unicom, then said, "No reason, except for the one you've already speculated on: that he deliberately strayed and put the plane into a dive in order to kill himself."

"Looked that way to me. To the NTSB investigators, too."

I was silent as he turned onto final approach, allowing him to concentrate on landing in the strong crosswind. He didn't speak again till we were turning off the runway.

"Ninety percent of flying's mental and emotional—you know that," he said. "And ninety percent of the instructor's job is figuring out where the student's head is at, adapting your teaching methods to the individual. I like to think I've got good instincts along that line, and I noticed absolutely nothing about Scott Oakley that indicated he'd kill himself."

"Tell me about him."

"He was a nice kid, in his early twenties. From this area originally, but went up to Reno to attend the University of Nevada. Things didn't go well for him academically, so he dropped out, went to work as a dealer at one of the casinos. Met a woman, fell in love, got engaged."

He maneuvered the plane between its tie-down chains, shut it down, and got out, then helped me climb from the cramped backseat. Together we secured the chains and began walking toward the small terminal building where his Land Rover and my MG were parked.

"If Oakley lived in Reno, why was he taking flying lessons

Solo flight plays a role not only in this new Sharon McCone story but in the 1995 novel (and sixteenth McCone book) *A Wild and Lonely Place* (Mysterious Press). The San Francisco P.I.-turned amateur pilot makes a welcome third appearance in *EQMM* this month, though the case she cracks takes her away from her home turf to the hills and lakes of Nevada. ✝

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down here?" I asked. Tufa Lake was a good seventy miles south, in the rugged mountains south of the California border.

"About six, eight months ago his father got sick—inoperable cancer. Scott came home to help his mother care for him. While he was here he figured he'd use the money he was saving on rent to take up flying. There isn't much future in dealing at a casino, and he wanted to get into aviation, build up enough hours to be hired by an airline."

"And other than being a nice kid, he was . . . ?"

"Quiet, serious, very dedicated and purposeful. Set a fast learning pace for himself, even though he couldn't fly as much as he'd've liked, owing to his responsibilities at home. A month ago his father died; he offered to stay on with his mother for a while, but she wouldn't hear of it. Said she knew the separation from his girlfriend had been difficult and she didn't want to prolong it. But he came back down for a lesson each week, and on that last day he'd done three excellent takeoffs and landings. I had full confidence that I could get out of the plane."

"And you noticed nothing emotionally different about him beforehand?"

"Nothing whatsoever. He was quiet and serious, just like always."

We reached the place where our vehicles were parked, and I perched on the rear of the MG. Hy faced me, leaning against his Rover, arms folded across his chest. His eyes were deeply troubled, and lines of discouragement bracketed his mouth.

I knew what he was feeling: He took on few students, as he didn't need the money and his work for the international security firm in which he held a partnership often took him away from his ranch here in the high desert country for weeks at a time. But when he did take someone on, it was because he recognized great potential in the individual—both as a pilot and as a person who would come to love flying as much as he himself did. Scott Oakley's crash—in his full sight as he stood on the tarmac at the airport awaiting his return—had been devastating to him. And it had also aroused a great deal of self-doubt.

I said, "I assume you want me to look into the reason Oakley killed himself."

"If it's something you feel you can take on."

"Of course I can."

"I'll pay you well."

"For God's sake, you don't have to do that!"

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"Look, McCone, you don't ask your dentist friend to drill for free. I'm not going to ask you to investigate for free, either."

"Oh, don't worry, Ripinsky. Nothing in life's free. We'll come up with some suitable way for you to compensate me for my labors."

My obvious starting place was Scott Oakley's mother. I called to ask if I could stop by, and set off for her home in Vernon, the small town that hugged the lake's north shore.

It was autumn, the same time of year as when I'd first journeyed here and met Hy. The aspens glowed golden in the hollows of the surrounding hills and above them the sky was a deep blue streaked with high cirrus clouds. In the years that I'd been coming to Tufa Lake, its water level had slowly risen and was gradually beginning to reclaim the dusty alkali plain that surrounded it—the result of a successful campaign by environmental organizations to stop diversions of its feeder streams to southern California. Avocets, gulls, and other shorebirds had returned to nest on its small islands and feed on the now plentiful brine shrimp.

Strange that Scott Oakley had chosen a place of such burgeoning vitality to end his own life.

Jan Oakley was young to have lost a husband, much less outlived her son—perhaps in her early forties. She had the appearance of a once-active woman whose energy had been sapped by sadness and loss, and small wonder: It had been only two weeks since Scott's crash. As we sat in the living room of her neat white prefab house, she handed me a high-school graduation picture of him; he had been blond, blue-eyed, and freckle-faced, with an endearingly serious expression.

"What do you want to ask me about Scott, Ms. McCone?"

"I'm interested in what kind of a person he was. What his state of mind was before the accident."

"You said on the phone that you're a private investigator and a friend of Hy Ripinsky. Is he trying to prove that Scott committed suicide? Because he didn't, you know. I don't care what Hy or the National Transportation Safety Board people think."

"He doesn't want to prove anything. But Hy needs answers—much as I'm sure you do."

"Answers so he can get himself off the hook as far as responsibility for Scott's death is concerned?"

I remained silent. She was hurting, and entitled to her anger.

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After a moment Jan Oakley sighed. "All right, that was unfair. Scott admired Hy; he wouldn't want me to blame him. Ask your questions, Ms. McCone."

I asked much the same things as I had of Hy and received much the same answers, as well as Scott's Reno address and the name of his fiancée. "I never even met her," Mrs. Oakley said regretfully, "and I couldn't reach her to tell her about the accident. She knows by now, of course, but she never even bothered to call."

I'd about written the interview off at that point, but I decided to probe some more on the issue of Scott's state of mind immediately before he left for what was to be his last flying lesson. After my first question, Mrs. Oakley failed to meet my eyes, clearly disturbed.

"I'm sorry to make you relive that day," I said, "but how Scott was feeling is important."

"Yes, I know." For a moment it seemed that she might cry, then she sighed again, more heavily. "He wasn't . . . He was upset when he arrived late the night before."

"Over what?"

"He wouldn't say."

Sometimes instinct warns you when someone isn't telling the whole truth; this was one of those times. "What about the next morning? Did he say then?"

She looked at me, startled. "How did . . . ? All right, yes, he told me. Now I realize I should have stopped him, but he wanted so badly to solo. I thought, One time—what will it matter? All he wanted was to take that little Cessna around the pattern alone one time before he had to give it all up."

"Give up flying? Why?"

"Scott had a physical checkup in Reno the day before. He was diagnosed as having narcolepsy."

"Narcolepsy," Hy said. "That's the condition when you fall asleep without any warning?"

"Yes. One of my friends suffers from it. She'll get very sleepy, drop off in the middle of a conversation. One time we were flying down to southern California together; the plane was landing, and she just stopped talking, closed her eyes, and slept till we were on the ground."

"Jesus, can't they treat it?"

"Yes, with ephedrine or amphetamine, but it's not always successful."

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"And neither the drugs nor the condition would be acceptable to an FAA medical examiner."

"No. Besides, there's an even more potentially dangerous side to it: A high percentage of the people who have narcolepsy also suffer from a condition called cataplexy in which their body muscles become briefly paralyzed in stressful or emotional situations."

"Such as one would experience on a first solo flight." Hy grimaced and signaled for another round of drinks. We were sitting at the bar at Zelda's, the lakeside tavern at the tip of the peninsula on which Vernon was located. The owner, Bob Zelda, gave him a thumbs-up gesture and quickly slid a beer toward him, a white wine toward me.

"You know, McCone, it doesn't compute. How'd Scott pass his student pilot's medical?"

"The condition was only diagnosed the day before you soloed him. And remember, those medicals aren't a complete workup. They check your history and the obvious—blood pressure, sight, hearing. They're not looking for something that may be developing."

"Still doesn't compute. Scott was a good, responsible kid. Went strictly by the letter as far as the regulations were concerned. I can't believe he'd risk soloing when he knew he could nod off at any time."

"Well, he wanted it very badly."

"Christ, why didn't he level with me? I'd've soloed him without getting out of the plane. He could've flown the pattern with absolutely no input from me, but I'd've been there in case. Doesn't count for getting the license, of course, but his mother told you he'd already decided to give it up."

We drank silently for a minute. I watched Hy's face in the mirrored backbar. He was right: It didn't compute. He needed answers and, now, so did I.

I said, "I'll drive up to Reno tomorrow."

Scott's former apartment was in a newish complex in the hills on the northeast side of Reno, high above the false glitter of the gambling casinos and the tawdry hustle of the Strip. I parked in a windswept graveled area behind it and went knocking on the doors of its immediate neighbors. Only one person was home, and she was house-sitting for the tenant and had never heard of Scott Oakley.

When I started back to my car, a dark-haired man in his mid twenties was getting out of a beat-up Mazda. He started across

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to the next cluster of apartments, and I followed.

"Help you with something?" he asked, setting down his grocery bag in front of the door to the ground-floor unit and fumbling in his pocket for keys.

"The son of a friend of mine lives here—Scott Oakley. Do you know him?"

"Oh God. You haven't heard?"

"Heard what?" I asked, and proceeded to listen to what I already knew. "That's awful," I said when he finished. "How's Christy holding up?"

"Christy?"

"His fiancée."

"Oh, that must be the redhead."

"She and Scott were engaged; I guess I just assumed they lived together."

"No, the apartment's a studio, too small for more than one person. Actually, I didn't know Scott very well, just to say hello to. But one of the other tenants, his downstairs neighbor, did say that Scott told him he wouldn't be living here long, because he planned to marry some woman who worked at the Lucky Strike down on the Strip."

The Lucky Strike had pretensions to a gold-rush motif, but basically it wasn't very different from all the other small Nevada casinos: Electronic games and slots beeped and whooped; bored dealers sent cards sailing over green felt to giddy tourists; waitresses who were supposed to be camp followers, clad in skimpy costumes that no self-respecting camp follower would ever have worn, strolled about serving free watery drinks. The bars, where keno numbers continually flashed on lighted screens, bore such names as The Shaft, Pick 'n Shovel, and The Assay Office.

I located the personnel office and learned that Christy Hertz no longer worked at the casino; she'd failed to show up for her evening cocktail-waitressing shift on the day of Scott Oakley's death and had not so much as called in since. The manager wasn't concerned; on the Strip, he said, women change jobs without notice as often as they do their hair color. But once I explained about Scott's death and my concern for Christy, he softened some. He remembered Scott Oakley from when he'd dealt blackjack there, had thought him a fine young man who would someday do better. The manager's sympathy earned me not only Christy's last known address, but the name of one of her friends who would be

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on duty that evening in The Shaft, as well as the name of a good friend of Scott who was the night bartender in The Assay Office.

As I started out, the manager called after me, "If you see Christy, tell her her job's waiting."

Christy Hertz's address was in a mobile home park in nearby Sparks. I've always thought of such enclaves as depressing places where older people retreat from the world, but this one was different. There were lots of big trees and planter boxes full of fall marigolds; near the manager's office, a little footbridge led over a man-made stream to a pond where ducks floated. I followed the maze of lanes to Christy's trailer, but no one answered her door. None of the neighbors were around, and the manager's office was closed.

Dead end for now, and the friends didn't come on duty at the Lucky Strike for several hours. So what else could I do here? One thing.

Find a doctor.

Years before, I'd discovered that the key to getting information from anyone was to present myself as a person in a position of authority—and that it was easy to do so without lying. Most people, unless they're paranoid or have something to hide, will cooperate with officials; their motives may range from respect to fear, but the result is the same. I tailored my approach to the situation by first driving to the public library and photocopying the Yellow Pages listings for physicians. Then, in a quiet corner of the stacks there, I went to work with my cell phone.

"My name is Sharon McCone. I'm an investigator looking into the cause of a fatal aviation accident that occurred two weeks ago near Tufa Tower Airport, Mono County, California. The victim was a student pilot who reportedly had been diagnosed with narcolepsy; the diagnosis wasn't noted on FAA form eight-four-two-zero-dash-two, so we assume it was made by a person other than a designated examiner. Would you please check your records to see if Scott Oakley was a patient?"

Only five people asked if I was with the Federal Aviation Agency or the National Transportation Safety Board. When I admitted to being a private investigator working for the victim's mother, two cut me off, citing confidentiality of patient records, but the remainder made searches. All the searches came up negative.

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Maybe Clark Morris, Scott's friend who tended bar at The Assay Office, could steer me toward the right doctor.

Evening on the Strip: The sun was sinking over the Sierras and the light was golden, vying with the garish neon and coming up a winner. The sidewalks were crowded with people out for a Saturday-night good time—or looking for trouble. A drunken guy in cowboy garb bumped into a middle-aged couple and yelled an obscenity. They stared him down until he slunk off, muttering. I spotted three drug deals going down, two of them to minors. A trio of young Native Americans, probably fresh off one of the nearby reservations, paid an older, cynical-eyed man to buy them a six-pack. Hookers strolled, lonely men's gazes homing in on them like airplanes to radar transmitters. And on the curb a raggedly dressed girl of perhaps thirteen hunched, retching between her pulled-up knees.

I thought of Hy's ranch house, the stone fireplace, the shelves of western novels and Americana to either side of it. Of the easy chairs where we should now be seated, wineglasses to hand. Of quiet conversation, a good dinner, and bed. . . .

"Scott's doctor?" Clark Morris said. "I don't think he had one."

"He must've gone to somebody for his student pilot's medical exam."

"Excuse me a minute." The moustached bartender moved to a couple who had just pulled up stools, served them Bud Lights, and returned to me. "You were asking about the medical exam. I think he got it in Sparks—and only because he had to. Scott hated doctors; I remember him and Christy having a big blowup once because he wouldn't get a yearly physical."

The cocktail waitress signaled that she needed an order filled. Morris complied, poured me another glass of wine when he came back.

"Thanks. The reason I'm asking about the doctor is that Scott saw one the day before he died—"

"No way. He took Christy on a picnic that day, out at Pyramid Lake, one of their favorite places. They left real early."

"Well, maybe his mother got it wrong. It could've been the day before that."

"I don't think so. Scott was working construction in Sparks all that week."

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"Oh? He wasn't dealing cards anymore?"

"That too—at Harrah's. He needed the money because he wanted to get married. He was going to talk to Christy about setting the date while they were on their picnic. He really loved that woman, said he had to marry her before it was too late."

"Too late for what?"

Morris frowned, then spread his hands. "Damned if I know."

Lynda Collins, Christy Hertz's friend, wore one of the camp-follower costumes and looked exhausted. When the time came for her break from her duties in The Shaft, she sank into the chair opposite me and kicked off her high-heeled shoes, running her stockinged toes through the thick carpet.

"So who hired you?" she asked. "It couldn't've been that no-good bastard of a stepfather of Christy's, trying to find out where she's living now. I know—poor, wimpy Scott."

"You haven't heard about Scott?"

"Heard what?"

"He's dead." I explained the circumstances, watching the shock register in Collins's eyes.

"That's awful!" she said. "I wonder why Christy didn't let me know? I wonder if *she* knows?"

"I take it you didn't like Scott."

"Oh, he was all right, but he couldn't just let go and have a good time, and he was stifling Christy. The flying was the one real thing he ever did—and look how that turned out."

"I understand he and Christy went on a picnic at Pyramid Lake the day before he died."

"They did? Oh, right, now I remember. Funny that I haven't heard from her since then. I wonder how Scott took it?"

"Took what?"

"Christy was going to break it off with him when they were up there. She met somebody else while Scott was living down at his mom's place—a guy from Sacramento, with big bucks and political connections. Since Scott got back, she couldn't get up the nerve to tell him, but she had to pretty soon because she and this guy are getting married next month. God, I hope she let Scott down easy."

Again there was no answer at Christy Hertz's mobile home, but lights shone next door. I went over, knocked, and asked the woman who responded if she'd seen Hertz recently.

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"Oh no, honey, it's been at least two weeks. She's probably on vacation, planning her wedding. At least that's what she told me she planned to do."

"When was the last time you saw her?"

"It was . . . Yes, two weeks ago last Thursday. She was leaving with that good-looking blond-haired boy. I guess he's the lucky fellow."

"Did she take any luggage?"

"She must have, but all I saw was a picnic hamper."

The park office was closed. I stood on its steps, debating what could be a foolhardy move, then doubled back to Hertz's. The lights still shone next door, but to the other side all the trailers were dark. I went that way and checked Hertz's windows till I found one that was open a crack, then removed the screen, slid the glass aside, and entered.

Inside I stood listening. The mobile home had the feel of a place that is unoccupied and has been for some time. I took my flashlight from my purse and shone it around, shielding the beam with my hand. Neat stacks of magazines and paperbacks, dishes in a drainer by the sink, a well-scrubbed stovetop and counters. My impression of Hertz as a tidy housekeeper was contradicted, however, by a bowl of rotting fruit on the dining table and milk and vegetables spoiling in the fridge.

A tiny hallway led to a single bedroom and bath. The bed was made and clothing hung neatly in the closet. In the bathroom I found cosmetics and a toothbrush in the holder and a round compact containing birth control pills. The date above the last empty space was that of the day before the picnic at Pyramid Lake.

On my way out I spotted the glowing message light on the answering machine.

"Christy, this is Dale. Just checking to see how it went. I love you."

"Christy, are you there? If you are, pick up. Okay, call me when you get this message."

"Christy, where the hell are you? For God's sake, call me!"

"Okay, let me guess: You patched it up with Scott. The least you could do is tell me. But then you couldn't tell him about *me,* now could you?"

"I'm giving you one more chance to explain. If you don't return this call within twenty-four hours, that's it for us!"

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Christy Hertz hadn't been too wise in her choice of either man.

I'd never been to Pyramid Lake before, but as I stood on a boat launching ramp on its western shore, I felt as if I'd come home. Like Tufa Lake, it was ancient and surreal, the monolith from which it had taken its name looming darkly; on the far shore clustered domes and pinnacles very like the tufa towers. A high, milky overcast turned the still water to silver; a few boats drifted silently in the distance; above, the migratory waterfowl wheeled, swooping low in their quest for food.

The lake was some thirty miles north of Reno, surrounded by a Paiute Indian reservation. Upon my arrival I'd driven along the shore to Sutcliffe, a village whose prefab homes and trailer parks and small commercial establishments seemed to have been scattered beside the water by some gigantic and indiscriminate hand. There I'd shown the picture Scott Oakley's mother had given me to clerks in grocery stores and boat rental and bait shops—anywhere a couple on a picnic might have stopped—but to no avail. At the offices of the Pyramid Lake Tribal Enterprises—whose function seemed to be to sell fishing licenses—I was advised to try Saltby's Bait and Tackle, some ten minutes north. But Saltby's was closed, and I was fresh out of options.

A sound made me turn away from the water. A rusted-out white pickup, coming this way. It pulled up next to the little store, and an old man got out; he unlocked the door, went inside, and turned the Closed sign over to Open. I hurried up the boat ramp.

The man had longish gray hair and a nut-brown complexion weathered by years of harsh elements, and the reception he gave me was as one of his own. My great-grandmother was a full-blooded Shoshone, and my looks reflect her part of the family gene pool; sometimes that's a hindrance, but it can also be a help.

I showed him Scott's picture. "Two weeks ago Thursday, did you see this man? He would've been with a redheaded woman—"

"Yes. They've come here many times. They always rent one of my motorboats and take a picnic to the east shore."

"And you're sure about the date?"

He nodded.

"What time did they get here?"

He reached under the counter and produced a rental log, ran a gnarled finger down the listings. "Ten in the morning. They brought the boat back at four—a long time for them."

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"When they brought it back, who returned the keys and paid?"

"The young man."

"Did you see the woman?"

He considered. "No. No, I didn't."

The only other thing I needed to ask him was how to find the office of the tribal police.

The tribal police located what was left of Christy Hertz's body at a little after three that afternoon. It was concealed in a small cavern fashioned by the elements out of a dome on the east shore, and beside it lay a bloodstained rock. Her skull had been crushed.

I could imagine the scenario: Scott pressing her to set a wedding date; Christy telling him she already had, but with someone else. And Scott—the good kid who took life so seriously, who worked hard at doing the right thing and now couldn't understand what he'd done wrong—striking out at her. Striking out in blind anger, because everything he cared about was being taken from him.

After he hid the body, he went through the motions—returning the boat, driving down to Vernon as scheduled. When he was unable to conceal his distress from his mother, he'd come up with a lie that would make his suicide look to be an accident. And then he'd taken the Cessna trainer around the pattern at Tufa Tower—three times, perfectly, so Hy could get out of the plane. Perfectly, so he could end his own life.

The next afternoon I was at the controls of the Citabria, and Hy rode in the backseat. I put it into a steep-banked turn, keeping the tip of the left wing on Plover Island, where Scott had crashed and burned.

Through our linked headsets, Hy said, "A decent kid is pushed too far, kills somebody he loves, and then kills himself. He was so intent on dying and such a good actor that I hadn't a clue."

"And now his mother will have to live with what happened."

"At least she's got the comfort of knowing he tried to spare her."

"Small comfort."

"Dammit, McCone, why don't suicides think of the people they'll be leaving behind?"

For a moment I didn't speak, concentrating on fighting the winds aloft, trying to keep the wingtip centered on the island. It's an exercise in directional control you learn during flight training, and normally I enjoy it. Not today, though, not in these winds.

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I gave up on it and headed south, to check out the obsidian domes at the volcanic field. "Ripinsky," I said, "suicidal people are very self-involved, we all know that. And a lot of them, like Scott, just plain don't want to take responsibility for their own lives."

"So they crap up everybody else's life too."

I put on full throttle and pulled back on the stick; instead of flying over the domes, I'd take it way up, practice some aerobatic maneuvers. Nothing amused Hy more than being along for the ride when I managed to turn a simple loop into something that resembled a corkscrew. And he badly needed to be cheered up right now.

"You know," I said, "it occurs to me that a life lived well is a lot like a solo flight. You accept responsibility, do the best you can, and go on from there."

I glanced back at him; he nodded.

"And that's enough philosophizing for today," I added.

I leveled off, pulled back on the stick, and pushed the throttle in all the way. The plane shot upward on the vertical. In ten seconds, I had him laughing.●

DETECTIVERSE

Bombs Away

by Rose-Marie P. Burns

Maureen planned the perfect crime.
All it took was one thin dime.
She dropped it down the hated snore —
Now Maureen's Mr. is no more.

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Political Corrections

by Simon Brett

There was a large and, to the minds of many observers, unconventional house party assembled for Christmas at Stebbings. The Dowager Duchess of Haslemere had never had any inhibitions about mixing her guests, though the composition of the assembly would have been unthinkable had her husband, the Duke, still been alive.

Apart from her two children, Hubert—who had inherited the title—and his sister Lady Cynthia, none of the Dowager Duchess's guests was quite the goods. There was Adolphus Weinburg, the well-to-do Hebrew financier, whose—

Although Simon Brett writes brilliantly about the current fixations of the publishing industry, his own background, prior to becoming a full-time writer, was not with the print mediu.n but with television. He was the producer of many successful programs for British TV, including *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy,* before becoming a freelance writer.

"I'm sorry. We can't have this."

Tilson Gutteridge did not lift the nicotine-yellowed finger that was following the lines of faded typescript, but raised his eyes to the young woman beside him. She was undeniably pretty, but in a way that didn't appeal. The dark red hair was too geometrically cut, the blue eyes behind the dark-rimmed round glasses were too pale and humourless to accord with his, perhaps old-fashioned, taste.

"What's the problem?" he asked ingenuously.

"This is anti-Semitic," said Juanita Rainbird. "We can't say 'Hebrew financier.' "

"Why not? It just means that he's Jewish."

"We can't say that nowadays. It's discriminatory."

"But look, that's what Eunice Brock wrote. It was the kind of thing they all wrote in the thirties. You'll find the same in

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Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, the lot of them."

"We still can't say it. Not in something we're publishing for the first time in the nineteen nineties." Her accent became more American as her assertiveness grew.

"But all Eunice Brock's other books have been reprinted as she wrote them."

"Some of the titles have been changed. Like *The Company of Ishmaels* became *The Company of Fraudsters.*"

"That amendment can hardly have been considered very flattering to the Jews, can it?"

"It has made for an acceptable title," Juanita Rainbird replied evenly. "And think how many changes Agatha Christie's *Ten Little Niggers* has been through. First it became *Ten Little Indians—*"

"Then *Ten Little Native Americans* . . . ?" Tilson Gutteridge suggested mischievously.

The editor was unamused. "No. Now it's known as *And Then There Were None.* . . . And I'm sure if its manuscript arrived today on the desk of any editor in the country, it would be re-edited for publication.

"Hm. Shall we press on?"

His finger hadn't moved from the line of text. As his eyes reverted to the typescript, Juanita Rainbird looked at her visitor without enthusiasm. Tilson Gutteridge was a man in his sixties, wearing the shapeless tweeds and knitted tie of another generation. A whiff of cherrywood tobacco, whisky, and something else less wholesome hung around him. It was only with difficulty that Juanita had convinced him there were no exceptions to Krieper & Thoday's no smoking policy and persuaded him to put the noisome pipe back into his bulging pocket.

There was something over-the-top, almost operatic, about the man's appearance. The pebble glasses seemed too thick, the eyebrows too bushy, the ill-fitting false teeth too yellowed. Tilson Gutteridge looked a parodic archetype of a literary figure who had never succeeded and was now long past any possible sell-by date.

Still, Juanita knew she had to humour him. He still hadn't revealed how he'd come by the manuscript, but it was undoubtedly a valuable commodity. Krieper & Thoday were still doing very well from the sales stimulated by the continuing Wenceslas Potter television series. The discovery of a new Eunice Brock would be just the sort of publishing coup to endear Juanita Rainbird to the new Australian managing director, Keith Chappick.

The publicity department could get a lot of mileage out of a

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long-lost manuscript. Regardless of the quality of the book, after some judicious editing it would sell well on curiosity value alone.

And with a bit of luck there wouldn't be any royalties to pay. Eunice Brock had died in 1939. For the fifty years after her death, the royalties on the Wenceslas Potter books had gone to her niece, Dierdre Townley, who had conveniently passed on in 1990, leaving no heirs. Dierdre hadn't made much out of her inheritance. Though the books had remained more or less in print, the real revival of interest in Eunice Brock had started in 1992 with the first Wenceslas Potter television series. That was when the estate had started to be worth something, and by then, of course, all the profits went direct to Krieper & Thoday.

Increasingly Juanita Rainbird wondered where Tilson Gutteridge had found the manuscript they were perusing, and whether or not he had any rights to it. If he could prove ownership, he'd have to be paid something for the typescript. If he could prove he also owned the copyright, he and his heirs would receive royalties for fifty years after the book's publication.

Juanita knew she must move cautiously, suppress her instinctive curiosity and play the scene at her guest's pace. The information she needed would come in time.

"Could I offer you something to drink . . . ?" she suggested, to thaw the developing atmosphere between them. "Coffee . . . or something from the fridge . . . ?"

Tilson Gutteridge's eye gleamed. "Something from the fridge, please."

She reached to the side of her desk and swung the door open to reveal the fridge's packed interior. "Orange juice or Perrier?"

The man's face fell. "I'll have a black coffee, thanks."

Before she filled a cup for him from the machine, Juanita Rainbird explained severely, "I should just point out that my getting coffee for you is not an expression of any subservient gender role-play. I would be equally ready to get coffee for a guest of my own sex."

Tilson Gutteridge looked bewildered. "Fine," he murmured.

Juanita Rainbird placed the cup of coffee on the desk in front of him. "Right, let's get back to the text, shall we?"

His finger moved along under the lines as they both silently read on.

. . . the well-to-do Hebrew financier . . .

Without comment, Juanita Rainbird stuck a yellow Post-it sticker in the margin beside these words and scribbled a pencil note on her clipboard.

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. . . whose hair, black, thick, and naturally curly, exuded the fragrance of some violet-scented pomade. He had fleshy, prominent features, his long nose curving down almost in mirror image of his jutting chin . . .

"That's unacceptable too."

"She's just saying what the bloke looked like," Tilson Gutteridge protested wearily.

"Yes, but couched in those terms it becomes a racist slur."

"Oh, come on, that's how everyone talked in the thirties. For heaven's sake, don't make such a meal of it, darling."

Juanita's eyes beamed blue fire at her visitor. "I am sorry, Mr. Gutteridge, but I must ask you to refrain from the use of diminishing sexist endearments."

"Er . . . ?"

She took no notice of his puzzlement, but returned to the typescript.

Another of the Dowager Duchess's guests also aspired to, but failed to meet, the qualification of an English gentleman. Though not of the Semitic brotherhood, he too was an oily cog in the machinery of finance . . .

Juanita Rainbird's pencil, once again offended, raced across her pad.

Ras Gupta was an oriental gentleman, who had made a killing from firms about to go smash, scooping up their shares at cat's meat prices . . .

Tilson Gutteridge's finger stopped and he looked up solicitously at Juanita. "Any worries about complaints from the cat protection lobby?"

The editor pursed her lips. "Let's just press on, shall we?"

This dark-complexioned aspirant's attempts to pass himself off as the genuine article were let down by the flashiness of the loud attire he favoured, not to mention a native predilection for shoddy jewellery. The ridiculousness of his appearance was accentuated by his dwarfish stature, which qualified him better for a circus ring than the drawing room of a dowager duchess.

Juanita Rainbird could restrain herself no longer. "That'll have to be changed," she blurted out.

"Why?"

"It's sizeist."

"Eh?"

"The emphasis on the man's non-average altitudinal endowment could cause offence to readers similarly afflicted." She realized her

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mistake and moved quickly to limit the damage. "That is, I don't use the word 'afflicted' in any pejorative sense. In no way do I wish to imply that someone vertically challenged has less validity or viability as a human being than someone of more traditional anatomical configuration."

"Er . . . ?" Tilson Gutteridge looked at her blankly. "So what are you saying—Ras Gupta can't be described as short . . . ?"

"No."

". . . even though the plot hinges on the fact that he is the only one of the house guests small enough to have crawled out of the scullery window on Christmas night after the Dowager Duchess had been murdered?"

"Well . . ." Juanita Rainbird was momentarily checked. Then her pencil dashed down another note. "I'm sure we'll be able to find an alternative formula of words to deal with that problem."

Tilson Gutteridge shrugged and readdressed his attention to the typescript.

Another of the guests at the Stebbings gloried in the name of the Vicomte de Fleurie-Rizeau. An effeminate Gallic lounge lizard, whose fractured English was uttered in an affected lisp and whose movements were almost ladylike in their dainty—

"This won't do," said Juanita Rainbird. But before she could launch into her homophobia lecture, she caught sight of the watch on her wrist. "Oh, goodness, I didn't realize it was so late. It's lunchtime."

Tilson Gutteridge grinned. "Splendid. Where are we going? Needn't be too lavish. Just an Italian or something. So long as they serve a decent red wine, eh?"

Juanita Rainbird looked at him grimly. "I'm sorry, Mr. Gutteridge. That was not an invitation. I'm already committed to sharing a working sandwich with my managing director."

"Oh well, have to do it another time, won't we?"

"I should also point out that Krieper & Thoday have recently instituted an across-the-board no-lunching policy. The only exception to that rule being the lunching on publication day of authors whose previous works have made the *Sunday Times* bestseller lists."

"Oh. I thought lunch was one of the main activities of publishers."

"You have a rather dated image of our industry, I'm afraid, Mr. Gutteridge," said Juanita Rainbird austerely. "Anyway, it's not as if you're even an author, are you?"

"No," he agreed. "So . . . what? We'll continue going through the manuscript another time?"

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"Yes. Unless you'd like to leave it with me and I'd—"

His hands were instantly out to snatch up the typescript and clutch it protectively to his chest. "I'm not letting this out of my sight."

"Well, maybe you'd like to stay here while one of my assistants—" She quickly corrected herself, "—one of my *coworkers* photocopies—"

Tilson Gutteridge shook his head firmly. "This stays with me and is not reproduced until we've sorted out a deal."

"Yes . . ." Juanita Rainbird paused, selecting her next words with care. "This does of course bring us on to the question of ownership . . . more specifically, perhaps, how you came to be in possession of the manuscript . . . ?"

The man grinned complacently.

". . . and indeed what rights—if any—you might have in the property . . . ?"

"Oh, it's mine all right," he assured her.

"It may be yours in the sense that you physically have the typescript in your possession, but the issue of copyright is a totally different—"

"The copyright is mine too."

Juanita Rainbird allowed herself a little laugh. "I don't see how that could be possible, Mr. Gutteridge."

"It's possible," he told her, "because I have recently discovered something of my family history."

"Oh?"

"I have always known myself to be illegitimate. I was adopted as a baby. It was only last month that I found out the identity of my real mother."

He played the silence for a little more than it was worth.

"My real mother was Eunice Brock."

Juanita Rainbird said nothing, but her mind was racing.

"So I am not only the owner of the physical manifestation of this manuscript, but also of its copyright."

The editor did the sums quickly in her head. It wasn't a disaster. So they'd have to pay royalties on the one book; their profits on the rest of the Eunice Brock *oeuvre* would remain intact.

"Not only that," Tilson Gutteridge went on gleefully. "I am also the copyright-holder on the rest of my mother's published work."

Juanita Rainbird gave a confident smile as, politely but deftly, she dashed his aspirations.

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"I'm sorry, Mr. Gutteridge, but I'm afraid your mother's published works went out of copyright in 1989."

"I know that, Juanita sweetie." He didn't give her time to object to the sexist diminutive as he went on. "But I'm sure I don't have to tell someone in publishing that, as of summer 1995, the period of copyright is to be extended from fifty to seventy years after an author's death . . ."

Juanita Rainbird gaped.

". . . so my mother's works are about to come back into copyright, where they will remain until the year 2009."

Keith Chappick didn't know much about books, but he was good at sacking people, so he was doing very well in publishing. In his native Australia he'd started by sacking people in newspapers, then moved on to sacking people in television. It was as a television executive that he'd arrived in England, and the move to sacking people in publishing had been a logical one. He had been through two other publishing houses before taking up the appointment at Krieper & Thoday. In each one he'd sacked more people and been given a higher-profile job with more money.

The Keith Chappick management style had been quickly imposed on Krieper & Thoday. On his first day he'd sacked the publishing director and two senior editors; thereafter he ruled by simple terror. The staff, secure in nothing save the knowledge that their jobs were permanently on the line, spread themselves ever thinner, taking on more and more work, putting in longer and longer hours. Uncomplaining, they annexed the responsibilities of sacked colleagues, knowing that refusal of any additional burden was a one-way ticket to the dole queue. Within six months of the new managing director's arrival, the same amount of work was being done by a third of the previous staff. Krieper & Thoday's shareholders were delighted.

Complaints about Keith Chappick's idiosyncratic management techniques became as improbable as complaints about work load. No one demurred when the nine o'clock half-hour of aikido was made mandatory for all staff. They trotted off like lambs to the slaughter of paint-ball combat weekends. Even the no-lunching diktat was accepted without a murmur by people who had hitherto been among the most dedicated contributors to the profits of Orso, Nico Ladenis, and the Groucho Club.

Nor would any member of staff contemplate refusing the man-

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aging director's summons to "share a working sandwich" in the half-hour before he went off to lunch at the Connaught.

The invitation—"subpoena" might be a better word—was literal. The sandwich was singular, and it was shared. That day Juanita Rainbird got half a tuna and cucumber, while Keith Chappick probed her working record for reasons that might allow him to sack her.

Juanita gave him the good news and the bad news. Coming across a new Eunice Brock manuscript was undoubtedly good news; coming across an accompanying copyright-holder with a claim to the whole estate undoubtedly bad.

"What proof do we have that he's who he says he is?" asked Keith Chappick once the full story was out.

"None yet, but he's assured me he can produce documentation to authenticate his claim."

"Hm . . ." The managing director looked thoughtfully out of his top-floor aquarium of an office at the slate-grey winter sky. "And from what you say, he seems to have an accurate knowledge of copyright law . . . ?"

"An unhealthily accurate knowledge. He reckons, when the extension to seventy years comes in, he'll be due royalties on all Eunice Brock sales since the old girl's niece died."

"Shit. That's the period when the television series has been on. That's when the books have been really coining it."

"I know."

"Could make a nasty big hole in the company's profits—particularly as it'd be retrospective."

"Yes."

"Well, there's no way we're going to pay him. We've got to get round it somehow." He looked blandly at his employee. "Any ideas?"

This was another typical Keith Chappick management technique. Sacking was really all he did. He didn't regard it as part of his job to have ideas; that's what the staff were there for. Whatever the problem, they had to come up with the solution to it. If they didn't, they got sacked.

"The best thing would be . . ." Juanita Rainbird began cautiously, ". . . if we could prove that his claim was false, that he actually isn't who he says he is . . ."

"Is it known that Eunice Brock did have an illegitimate child?"

"There were strong rumours. That muckraking biography of her that came out a couple of years back stated it as an acknowledged fact."

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"Hm." Keith Chappick scratched his chin as he looked out over the London skyline.

"And Tilson Gutteridge'd be about the right age." Juanita shook her head ruefully. "The best thing'd be if we could prove someone else was really Eunice Brock's illegitimate child . . . and that that someone was either dead or totally unaware of their true identity."

"Yes . . ." said the managing director. Then, with increasing enthusiasm as the idea took hold, "Yes. That's what you'd better do, Juanita."

"What?"

"Find a rival claimant."

"But supposing there isn't one . . . ?"

Keith Chappick shrugged. "That's your problem. Incidentally . . . did this old geezer say whether he'd got family . . . you know, heirs of his own . . . ?"

"He's got no one. Not married, no relatives."

"So, if he were to die . . ." The managing director grinned, letting the idea float for a moment in the air-conditioned air. ". . . our problem would be at an end."

"Yes."

Keith Chappick looked briskly at his watch. The audience was over. "Leave it with you, Juanita. I'm relying on you to get it sorted . . . or . . ."

He didn't need to finish the sentence. The threat had been implicit from the beginning of the interview.

"This is man's work," averred Wenceslas Potter. "Don't you bother your pretty little nut about it."

"But I want to know who murdered Mummy," Lady Cynthia insisted. "It'd be a pretty shabby sort of daughter who wasn't interested."

"You're absolutely right!" the detective ejaculated. "And let it never be said that I could entertain the idea of anyone as pretty as you ever doing anything shabby. But believe me, I have your best interests at heart. I'm afraid the conscienceless cove who did for your mother might strike again."

"Oh!" Lady Cynthia's soft hand leapt in alarm to her ruby lips, and beneath the fine silk of her evening gown her bosom heaved. "How beyond words ghastly if that should happen! Wenceslas," she interrogated in a hushed voice, "are you suggesting that I myself am at risk from this bounder?"

"Not while I am here to protect you, milady," he responded with a

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gallant bow. "You may be no more than a feeble woman but—"

"This is horribly sexist," said Juanita Rainbird, her objections no longer satisfied by the continuous notes she was scribbling.

"Is it?" asked Tilson Gutteridge innocently. "I actually thought it was rather sexy."

The editor looked at him with distaste. Tilson Gutteridge seemed to have taken up squatting rights in her office. His tweed jacket was spread untidily across the back of his chair. The braces over his checked shirt were not trendy nineties braces; their perished elastic was reminiscent rather of the truss industry. The tobacco staleness that hung around him seemed to intensify the longer he spent in the room.

Juanita Rainbird wished she had never got into her current situation, having to spend long hours closeted with a man every detail of whose character she loathed. But there was no alternative. She needed to play for time, stretch out the line-by-line copy-editing of Eunice Brock's manuscript until she could see the way out of her dilemma. Because, if she wanted to keep her job, a way out had to be found.

She had made some headway in her investigations. Long hours of research at St. Catherine's House in Kingsway had finally yielded the undeniable fact of a birth certificate. Eunice Brock, under her real name of Phyllis Townley, had given birth to a male child in September 1927. No father's name was recorded.

Unearthing that information, though in one way satisfying, had at the same time been dispiriting, because it strengthened the possibility that Tilson Gutteridge was telling the truth. Proof that Eunice Brock had never had a son would have provided much more comfort.

Finding records of the baby's adoption was proving considerably more difficult, and Juanita Rainbird was beginning to suspect deliberate obfuscation. At the time of her son's birth, Eunice Brock was already a published author and something of a celebrity, so it was possible that she had intentionally clouded the waters to prevent any successful probing into her shameful lapse.

Juanita could not, at that moment, see what the next step of her investigation should be. Her eye strayed to the shelf of hardbacks on the wall and the thought she had been trying halfheartedly to suppress for some days bubbled back to the surface of her mind.

"If he were to die . . ." Keith Chappick had said, ". . . our problem would be at an end."

As a crime editor, Juanita Rainbird was extremely well versed

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in the means of murder. The fantasy methods of crime fiction's Golden Age—injecting air bubbles into veins, high musical notes shattering glass containers of poisonous gases—had given way to greater realism in contemporary examples of the genre. If Juanita ever did decide to murder someone, the works she had edited offered a rich variety of ways to achieve that end.

"So . . . are you suggesting it should be rewritten?"

Tilson Gutteridge's words brought her out of her reverie and back to the typescript. "Well, I don't like it."

"That's not the point."

"All its attitudes are very demeaning and diminishing to women."

"That's not the point either. And I would draw your attention to the fact that it was written by a woman—my mother, as it happens."

"Yes, but she was simply conforming to the phallocentric norms of the period. She didn't dare write Lady Cynthia as an assured, assertive woman, so she made her a pathetic little bit of fluff."

"Actually, it's rather important for the plot that Lady Cynthia's a pathetic little bit of fluff. For God's sake, why shouldn't Eunice Brock write about a stupid woman? Stupid women do exist, you know."

Tilson Gutteridge looked at Juanita Rainbird very directly as he said this last sentence; there was an edge of insolence in his expression. She turned away, as if suddenly interested in the one Christmas card on her desk. Its message was "Happy Holidays." (Juanita had thrown all cards with specifically Christian messages straight into the bin; she did not believe in prescriptive religion and had no wish to offend people of other faiths.)

Once again it was borne in on her what an utterly hateful man Tilson Gutteridge was. At times she didn't think she'd have any problem with her conscience if she did have to end up murdering him.

And, if she couldn't get another lead in her investigation, she probably would have to end up murdering him.

"Shall we press on?" he said rather tetchily, and once again his nicotine-stained finger traced along the lines of typescript.

"You may be no more than a feeble woman, but with me by your side you'd be safe in a jungle full of man-eating fuzzy-wuzzies."

"We can't have that!" Juanita Rainbird objected instinctively.

"Offend vegetarians, will it?" Tilson Gutteridge baited her.

"It will offend people of alternative—though no less viable—pigmentation."

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"Oh, for God's sake! You can't pretend black people aren't black. When I was at school, there was a black chap in my class and his nickname was 'Fuzzy-Wuzzy.' Everyone called him that. He didn't mind, or at least he never said he minded."

Juanita prepared to embark on her lecture about how sensibilities had changed, but thought better of it. Instead, she asked casually, "Where were you at school, actually, Mr. Gutteridge?"

"Public school called Whittinghams. South London. You heard of it?"

"No."

"Not surprising. It closed during the war. Never reopened."

"Oh, right," said Juanita Rainbird, carefully salting away the information.

"Now excuse me . . . just got to see a man about a dog."

Tilson Gutteridge's trips to the Gents were becoming ever more frequent, and each time he used the same odious, arch euphemism. Prostate trouble, Juanita surmised without great interest.

Only when he was out of the room did she realize it was the first time he'd not taken his jacket with him. While this confounded her conjecture that he kept a half-bottle of Scotch in the pocket, it did also open up new investigative possibilities.

She had no conscience about going through Tilson Gutteridge's pockets. Moral qualms prompted by such a minor offence would be pretty specious from someone who was contemplating the option of murder.

The jacket pockets, as she could have predicted, were full of unpleasantness. A handkerchief stained with snot and the nicotine dottle from his pipe. The pipe itself, which would probably be banned in any civilized country on environmental grounds. Some half-sucked peppermints, and other bits of fluff whose precise provenance she did not wish to know.

And an old diary. A 1989 diary which had clearly been kept because its owner had been too lazy to transfer the telephone numbers in the January of 1990 and of every other year since.

It was to this section that Juanita Rainbird hastily flicked the pages. Few of the addresses and phone numbers had any relevance for her.

The one she did note down, however, belonged to "BREEN, Horace—Old Whittinghamians Association."

By the time Tilson Gutteridge returned from the Gents, trying once again to wheedle an Italian lunch "with a decent bottle of red

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wine" out of Krieper & Thoday, the diary was innocently back in his jacket pocket.

The voice on the answerphone at Horace Breen's number sounded incredibly old, and when Juanita Rainbird met him at a pub in Dulwich, the reality of the man matched. He must have been well into his eighties, probably once as tall as Tilson Gutteridge, but now bent and shrunken. His face and hands were blotched and freckled; his pale milky eyes peered through thick glasses; and the flat mat of a toupee perched on top of his head seemed to accentuate rather than disguise his age. A shiny pinstriped suit hung off his wire coat-hanger shoulders. He wore a blue-and-yellow-striped tie, which in his first sentence he identified as "the Old Whittinghamians."

He offered the tiresome resistance of his generation to Juanita Rainbird's offer of a drink. "No, surely it's down to us chaps to buy drinks for the pretty little ladies, not the other way—" But she had no difficulty in cutting through all that. Walking from the door to their table seemed to have consumed his limited stock of energy; the journey to the bar and back would have crippled him.

As she ordered the requested half of bitter and her own habitual Perrier, she looked covertly back at the wizened figure and congratulated herself on her luck. If Horace Breen did hold the key to Tilson Gutteridge's past, she'd been fortunate to catch the old man before he enrolled in that great Old Boys' Club in the sky.

Horace Breen thanked her with excessive gallantry for the drink, taking one sip and then ignoring it for the rest of their conversation.

"I'm delighted to find someone of your generation interested in the history of Whittinghams. You see, I devoted my whole life to the school. I was there as a pupil, there I taught Latin and Greek for many years, and finally acted as bursar. No, splendid to know that a young person is drawn to the history of Whittinghams. Particularly someone in publishing. You say you think there might be a book in it?"

"Yes," Juanita Rainbird replied, confirming the lie she had used to engineer their meeting.

"Well, I suppose there wouldn't be that many people still around who'd be interested, but I can assure you that those who do survive would appreciate the book enormously." He let out a wheezy chuckle. "I wouldn't hold out hopes for a 'bestseller.' " He separated the word out with racy daring. "But I think I can guarantee you a *succès d'estime.*"

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"Excellent. Now could we—?"

"Of course, the foundation of the school goes back to the seventeenth century. In 1692, Thomas Wooltrap, merchant of the City of London, made an endowment for the education of twelve impoverished young scholars, 'that they might enjoy the benefits bestowed by a knowledge of the classical authors.' And for the first hundred and seventy years of the school's existence . . ."

Juanita Rainbird had to endure getting on for an hour of this before she could divert the conversation in her desired direction. Why, she wondered bitterly, had it become her fate to spend long hours closeted with boring old men?

All too readily the answer supplied itself. Because she wanted to keep her job. And because, if she didn't solve the Tilson Gutteridge problem, Keith Chappick would have not the tiniest qualm about sacking another editor.

This thought spurred her to interruption. "When you were bursar, Mr. Breen, were you in charge of the collection of fees?"

He looked somewhat taken aback and disappointed by her brusqueness, but replied meekly that such had indeed been his duties.

"And presumably the fees would be paid in a variety of different ways? From a variety of different sources?"

"Yes."

"I mean, some directly from parents, from grandparents, from family trusts, solicitors, and so on . . . ?"

"Indeed."

"Mr. Breen, did it ever happen that a boy's fees were paid secretly?"

"How exactly do you mean—'secretly,' Miss Rainbird?"

"I mean, say, in the case of an illegitimate child. . . . Did it ever happen that you were asked to be discreet about the actual source of the fees?"

Horace Breen's old-world values were deeply offended. "If that is the sort of book Krieper & Thoday are planning to publish about Whittinghams, I'm afraid I would feel honour bound to dissociate myself from—"

"No, Mr. Breen. My question is relevant, I promise, and nothing to do with muckraking. Specifically," she moved speedily on, "I'm interested in a boy who would have started at the school round 1939, 1940 . . . Do you remember individual pupils?"

This question was a challenge to his professional pride. Drawing himself up—or at least as much as it was possible for someone so

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shrivelled to draw himself up—he asserted that he remembered every boy in precise detail.

"The one I wanted to ask about was called Gutteridge."

The old man looked blank.

"Tilson Gutteridge."

"Tilson Gutteridge?" he echoed.

The total lack of recognition in his voice brought a flutter of hope to Juanita Rainbird. "Yes," she confirmed breathlessly.

"I'm sorry. There was no pupil at Whittinghams of that name in all the time I was at the school."

"Are you sure?"

Once again she'd offended him. "Of course I'm sure, Miss Rainbird! Was this imagined Gutteridge boy the one on whose legitimacy you were casting doubt?"

"Yes."

"Well, since he didn't exist, the details of his parentage becomes rather irrelevant, so far as I can see."

"Mm . . ."

"Of course, in the period we're talking about, illegitimacy was a rather more serious matter than it is in these benighted days. And yes, as you suggested, a parent in such unfortunate circumstances might have obscured the issue of who was actually paying the fees."

"Did that happen often, Mr. Breen?"

"At Whittinghams? Good heavens, no. It certainly wasn't that sort of school. In fact, I can only recall one instance of illegitimacy in all the time I was there."

"When was that?"

"Round the period we are talking about. During the War. Just before the school so sadly closed. There was one pupil called Crabbett. Crabbett, P. J. Nice lad. Very successful in the school plays—gave a lovely Titania, I recall, and then went on, I gather, to take up the theatre as a profession—one would have hoped for rather better from an Old Whittinghamian. Still, maybe blood will out. He was illegitimate, you see, having been adopted soon after birth, but, er . . ."

His undecided pause was agony for Juanita. "Oh, well," he said eventually, "I suppose it's too long ago now for my telling you to do any harm. . . . The boy's fees at Whittinghams were paid by his natural mother."

"You don't happen to remember what the mother's name was, do you, Mr. Breen?"

"Oh yes," the old man said with self-righteous pride. "I

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remember everything about Whittinghams."

Juanita Rainbird gazed at him eagerly through her little round glasses.

"The mother's name was Phyllis Townley."

"I baint abaht to tell you no lies," the booking-clerk confided. " 'Taint my hoccupation to tell lies, no way, guv'nor. I done hissued eight tickets for the 3:27 to Lancaster—three third singles, two third returns, and three first returns."

"So if our birds did catch that train," Wenceslas Potter mused, "they'd have been in time to catch the 4:03 from Preston, joining up at Godlings Halt with the 5:17 fast from Wolverhampton, which should have passed the 3:02 Glasgow Pullman Express going in the other direction in the Fairgrave Cutting at 6:13, though the unscheduled stop to take on water at Hulkiston Ward would have made it 6:21 before—"

"No objections to this bit?" asked Tilson Gutteridge.

"No." Juanita Rainbird looked at him curiously. "Why? There's nothing wrong with it."

A silence.

"What do you think's wrong with it?"

"Just a bit boring, that's all."

"Boring's all right. That's not unacceptable." She hastily qualified this generalization. "That is—it could be unacceptable if a person were described as boring. It could be offensive to say that a person is attentiveness-challenging—particularly in a case where you were discussing a person of alternative, but nonetheless viable, ethnicity."

She spoke the words automatically. Her mind was elsewhere, full of her forthcoming meeting with Peter Crabbett. On the off chance, she'd rung Equity, the British Actors Union, to see if they had a "P. Crabbett" registered as a member, and she had struck gold. They had been unwilling to release his address and phone number until she fabricated the line that she was a Hollywood casting director. With the rare prospect of potential work for one of its members, the Union became suddenly more forthcoming.

Pete—he insisted on "Pete"—Crabbett had sounded mild and amiable on the phone, and readily agreed to meet up with her. By coincidence, he too lived in the Dulwich area, and their rendezvous had been fixed for that evening at the same pub.

Juanita Rainbird's feverish anticipation made the line-by-line editing with Tilson Gutteridge more tedious than ever. Now she

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knew for certain the man was an impostor, she could hardly wait till she had the solid evidence with which she would be able to denounce him.

Her frustration mounting, Juanita returned to Eunice Brock's manuscript.

". . . would have made it 6:21 before the trains passed each other, so it was then that the poisoned dart from the blowpipe must have been projected into the Vicomte de Fleurie-Rizeau's first-class compartment."

The booking-clerk was lost in admiration. "Blimey, Mr. Potter, guv'nor, you're a whale on detection, and no mistake. How come you can work out difficult hinvestigations so easy while the likes of me's in a real pea-souper of a fog about 'em?"

The aristocratic sleuth laughed lightly. "Sorry, old chap," he commiserated. "Simple matter of breeding."

Juanita Rainbird ground her teeth.

Pete Crabbett was probably about the same age as Tilson Gutteridge, but whereas Tilson was revolting, the actor was all charm. Not aggressive, sexist charm, just a laid-back quiet integrity and an engaging honesty.

He made no demur about accepting a drink from Juanita. "Never refuse a free drink," he said with a rueful grin. "Never in a position to, I'm afraid."

"Not much acting work around?"

"Not for me, it seems. Not much writing work either."

"You're a writer too?"

"Well, I try. Without marked success."

From the bar Juanita Rainbird looked back at the table, as she had done the previous week. Pete Crabbett wore jeans and a floppy navy jumper. He had thick grey hair. Not unattractive. The pub was evidently his local; he kept smiling and nodding at people.

In the time since Juanita had met Horace Breen, the bar had been decorated for Christmas. Every surface was tinselled and frosted. For the first time, Juanita began to think she might even enjoy Christmas. The Tilson Gutteridge nightmare was about to end.

Pete Crabbett raised the pint of Guinness gratefully to his lips. "Wonderful," he said after a long swallow. "Now what can I do for you?"

Juanita Rainbird took a prim sip of Perrier before launching into her latest prepared falsehood. "Well, Mr. Crabbett—"

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"Pete, please."

"Pete. As I mentioned on the phone, I'm an editor for Krieper & Thoday, the publishers, and I'm exploring the possibility of commissioning a book on changing attitudes to illegitimacy in the twentieth century."

"Uh-huh."

"And this is . . . I hope you don't mind my asking you about this, Mr. Crabbett . . . ?"

"No problem." He grinned ingenuously. "I knew I was a little bastard from the moment I could understand anything. I don't have any problems with it."

"Good. In fact, I was put on to you by a Mr. Horace Breen . . . from Whittinghams School . . . ?"

"Good God, 'Sniffer' Breen! I'm surprised to hear the old boy hasn't popped his clogs yet."

"I don't think it'll be long. He looks pretty decrepit. I actually met him last week in this very pub, and he mentioned that you were one of the few, er . . ."

"Bastards?" he offered hopefully.

Juanita Rainbird smiled. It was comforting to find that all men in their sixties were not as repellent as Tilson Gutteridge.

"Exactly . . . that you were one of the few, er, bastards at Whittinghams."

"Hm. I'm actually surprised the school knew."

"Oh?"

"Well, I was adopted at a very early age. The Crabbetts always treated me as their own."

"But they didn't pretend to you that you were theirs?"

"No. As I said, I knew I was a bastard. Just lucky they took pity on me."

"But you did know who your birth mother was . . . ?"

"What?" Pete Crabbett grinned again and shook his head.

A surge like an electrical current ran through Juanita Rainbird as he said, "Good heavens, no. It never really interested me. If she'd showed such a lack of taste as not to want me, why should I want her?"

"So you've never been curious?"

He gave another life-affirming shake of his head. "Never once."

"And your adoptive parents—the Crabbetts—paid your fees at Whittinghams?"

He looked a little puzzled by the change of direction. "Well, I assume so. I wasn't chucked out, so I guess they must have done."

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Oh, it was marvellous. He was so innocent, so ingenuous. It was only with restraint that Juanita Rainbird could stop hugging herself. Everything had turned out better than she'd dared hope.

It was the dream scenario. Tilson Gutteridge could be exposed as an impostor. The genuine claimant to Eunice Brock's estate was totally unaware of his good fortune. He could be kept forever in blissful ignorance. Krieper & Thoday could continue to rake in the profits on the Eunice Brock books without paying any royalties. Keith Chappick would be pleased, and Juanita Rainbird would keep her job.

Just one more thing to check, then she could just relax and enjoy chatting to this rather amiable actor. "Tell me, Pete, have you ever met anyone called Tilson Gutteridge?"

He looked surprised. "Well, yes, I have actually. But what connection do you have with him?"

"He wasn't at school with you, was he?"

"Good heavens, no. I've only met him once."

"When was that?"

"Three or four months ago, I suppose."

"How did you meet him?"

"He just came and knocked on my door. Said he was a collector of old books and manuscripts—had I got anything around? Well, there was some stuff in the loft that I'd inherited when my father—that's Mr. Crabbett—died. I said he could have a look at it if he liked. He seemed to see something there that interested him, so he made me an offer."

"How much?"

"Fifty quid. I was dead chuffed, I can tell you."

I bet Tilson Gutteridge was too, thought Juanita grimly.

"Well, it can't have been worth that much. Just some old typescripts, no doubt way out of copyright."

Juanita Rainbird once again curbed her excitement. Could he really be as naive as he appeared? "What do you mean—'out of copyright'?"

"Well, doesn't copyright go on for fifty years after something's written . . . ?" he said vaguely and without much interest.

Better and better. Not only did he not know he had any connection with Eunice Brock, he also had no understanding of copyright law. And he certainly didn't know that the fifty-year limit from an author's death or a posthumous publication was about to be extended to seventy.

"Yes," said Juanita Rainbird calmly. "That's right."

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"The unutterable sweep who did this has forgotten every decent thing," opined Wenceslas Potter, as he gazed down at the body on the floor of the icehouse.

"But how did he do it?" queried Lady Cynthia, from whose cheeks the roses had fled to leave a snowy pallor. "Mr. Weinburg looks as though he has been frozen *to death."*

"He has," the aristocratic sleuth confirmed grimly. "But, if we had not come in here by chance, nobody would ever have known that."

"Elucidate, Wenceslas," Lady Cynthia begged. "I'm a simpleton when it comes to deduction. My feminine mind does not proceed as speedily as yours."

Even in the presence of death, the noble detective could not let by an opportunity for a compliment. "When a lady is as beautiful as you are," he offered gallantly, "let her feminine mind move at whatsoever speed it chooses."

Juanita Rainbird sucked her teeth, but still deferred the inevitable confrontation. She felt nervous knowing she could not put it off forever. Downstairs the office Christmas party that Keith Chappick had decreed would be coming to its end, the Perrier by now flowing like water. Soon Juanita would be alone in the building with the odious Tilson Gutteridge.

"No," Wenceslas Potter continued, "our murderer did not wish the body to be discovered like this." He knelt down and sniffed at the Hebrew financier's thick, frozen lips. "As I thought."

Lady Cynthia's eyes engaged his interrogatively.

"You see," the sleuth expatiated, "our homicidal friend required the sturdy Semite to die of natural causes—so far as the world was concerned. I recognize on Mr. Weinburg's lips the smell of a nerve-deadening drug—almost unknown in Harley Street—whose paralysing properties last exactly an hour and then cease, leaving no trace in the victim's bloodstream. Having immobilized the Israelite with that and dragged him out here, our murderer then filled the man's insensate, gaping mouth with water which, in the cold of the icehouse, froze solid and clogged the poor fellow's windpipe."

"How ghastly," murmured Lady Cynthia. "How beyond everything ghastly."

"His intention then was to take the defunct Ishmael to his bedroom where, the paralytic drug having worn off and the water melted, he would have appeared to have died of natural—"

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Juanita Rainbird could stand it no longer. "God, I hate this stuff. It's so unrealistic! It treats the readers like complete idiots. A murder could never happen like that."

"No?" asked Tilson Gutteridge.

"No. And since we've stopped, I think the moment has come for me to say what I've been putting off saying to you all day."

"Oh yes?"

"You're an impostor, Tilson Gutteridge!"

"What?"

"You are not who you claim to be. I have absolute proof of that." Juanita Rainbird reached suddenly into her desk drawer and pulled out a bound sheaf of typewritten pages. "It's all in here. My boss has a copy. Your little game is up, Mr. Gutteridge."

Meekly, with apparent puzzlement, the elderly man took the dossier and started to read. He showed no reaction as, with great concentration, he devoured every word. At the end, he placed it down on Juanita's desk.

"So . . . you've found out the truth?"

"Yes."

"This document proves, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that the rightful heir to Eunice Brock's estate—and to all royalties deriving from it until the new copyright expiration date of 2009—is Peter Crabbett."

"Exactly." Juanita Rainbird looked defiantly at Tilson Gutteridge, glad that at last the pretences were over and she could let her hatred for him show. "And what do you propose to do about that?"

He moved so quickly, she had no chance to protect herself. In an instant the syringe was out of his jacket pocket and stabbed into her upper arm. The plunger was deftly pressed home.

Juanita Rainbird's eyes widened and her mouth twitched, but the paralysing drug took effect before any words could emerge.

"Thank God for that," said Tilson Gutteridge, with feeling. "For once you'll keep your bloody mouth shut!"

She was still conscious as he opened the fridge. Still conscious, but unable to resist, as he crammed the contents of the ice tray into her mouth. There was awareness in her eyes as he laid her down with her head on the floor of the fridge. She seemed aware, too, of his turning the dial to its lowest setting, of his closing the door against her neck, and of the gradual, drop-by-drop way he poured the Perrier to congeal with the ice cubes in her throat.

Then the awareness faded from Juanita Rainbird's eyes.

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Tilson Gutteridge waited until the drug—still almost unknown in Harley Street—released its hold and the girl's body slumped in death. Then he sat Juanita Rainbird in the swivel chair behind her desk.

By the time she was found after the Christmas holiday, the building's central heating had melted the obstruction in her throat. Except for a small needle puncture in her upper arm and the symptoms of asphyxiation, there seemed no obvious explanation for Juanita Rainbird's death. Many of her colleagues put it down to overwork. Keith Chappick was happy to go along with this diagnosis; it made the rest of his staff even more paranoid.

The managing director did not mind about the death. Once Juanita had sorted out the Eunice Brock copyright trouble, he'd been intending to sack her anyway. Thwarted in this ambition, on New Year's Eve he sacked the publicity director instead. That cheered him up enormously.

And Keith Chappick remained cheerful until he got a call from Pete Crabbett's solicitor, staking his client's claim to the estate of Eunice Brock.

In the event the case didn't go to court, but if it had, Juanita Rainbird's meticulously detailed dossier would certainly have ensured that the verdict went in Pete Crabbett's favour. Realizing this and unwilling to add legal costs to the amount they already owed him in back royalties, Krieper & Thoday grudgingly accepted the actor's claim.

With his rights thus established, Pete Crabbett settled down to enjoy his good fortune. He could afford as many pints of Guinness as he wanted now. He even had enough to pay an upmarket nursing home to look after his beloved ninety-year-old natural mother.

And of course he'd long since destroyed the costumes and makeup he'd worn as Tilson Gutteridge and Horace Breen.

He couldn't help feeling rather pleased with himself for how well it'd all worked. The invention of the public school, "Whittinghams," was one of the details that gave him most satisfaction.

And he couldn't really feel much regret for the fact that Phyllis Townley's illegitimate son Terence had been killed in the Blitz.

Peter Crabbett might, at some point, be moved to "discover" more Eunice Brocks. But he decided, at the risk of anachronism, he'd make any subsequent typescripts a bit more politically correct than the first one. It'd probably save time in the long run. ●

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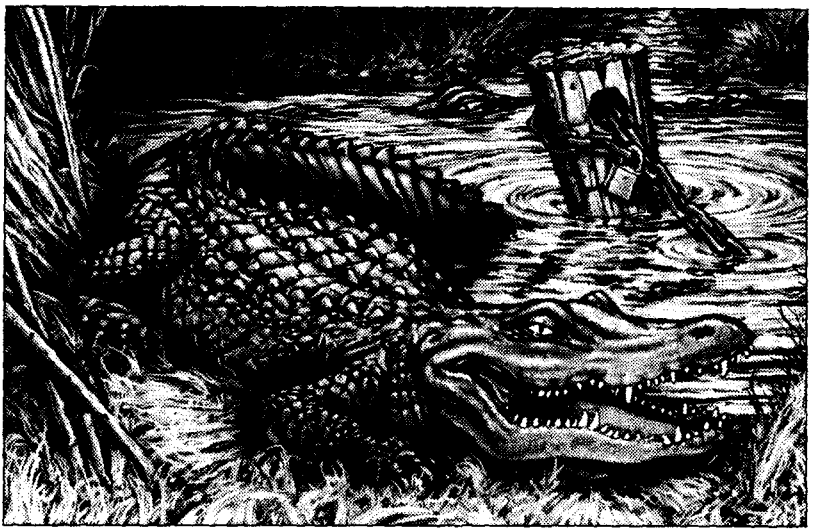

Art by Mike Aspengren

NIGHT CRAWLERS

by John Lutz

There's plant life in parts of the Everglades that's to be found nowhere else in the country, spores carried by hurricane winds from the West Indies that take root and flourish in the steamy tropical climate and are exotic and primitive and sometimes dangerous. Some say that in Mangrove City there's animal life to be found nowhere else.

Mangrove City isn't really a city unless you use the term generously. It's a stretch of ramshackle, moss-marred clapboard buildings where the road runs through the swamp along relatively dry land. The "city" is a few small shops, a restaurant, a service station with a sign warning you to fill your gas tank because the swamp's full of alligators, a barber shop with a red and white barber pole that's also green with mold. There's a police station in the same rundown frame building as the city hall, and a blackened ruin that was Muggy's Lounge until it burned down five years ago.

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Next to the ruin is the new and improved Muggy's, constructed of cinder block and with a corrugated steel roof. Not a city, really. Barely a town. More like something unfortunate that happened on the side of the road.

A mile before you get to Mangrove City, that is *before* if you're driving west the way Carver had, is the Glades Inn, a sixteen-unit motel. It's a low brick structure, built in a *U* to embrace a swimming pool. Carver couldn't imagine anyone ever actually swimming in the thing. The algae on its surface was green and thick. A diving board sagged toward the water and was draped with Spanish moss. From the far corner of the pool came a dull *plop* and a stirring of sluggish water as a bullfrog, tired of Carver's scrutiny, hopped for green cover. Carver set the tip of his cane on the hot gravel surface of the parking lot and limped toward the office.

Although more than two-dozen of John Lutz's stories have appeared in *EQMM* over the years, none prior to "Night Crawlers" has featured the author's well-known P.I. Fred Carver. Carver's current case was first made available to fans on the audio cassette *For Crime Out Loud,* edited by Robert J. Randisi (Durkin Hayes Audio).

As he pushed open the door, a bell tinkled. That didn't seem to mean much. The knotty-pine-paneled office was deserted. Behind the long counter, whose front was paneled to match the walls, was a half-eaten sandwich on a desk, next to an old black IBM Selectric typewriter. The only furniture on Carver's side of the desk was a red vinyl chair with a rip in its seat that revealed white cotton batting struggling to get out. On the wall near the chair was a framed color photograph of a buxom woman in a bikini and cowboy boots, riding on the back of a large alligator. She was grinning with her mouth open wide and had an arm raised as if she were waving the ten-gallon hat in her hand. Carver leaned close and studied the photograph. The woman was stuffed into the bikini. The alligator was just stuffed.

"Some sexy 'gator, don'tcha think?" a voice said.

Carver turned and saw a stooped old man with a grizzled gray beard that refused to grow over a long, curved scar on his right cheek. The right eye, near the scar, was a slightly different shade

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of blue from that of the left and might have been glass. The man had a wiry build beneath a ragged plaid shirt and dirty jeans. He was behind the desk, and Carver couldn't see much of the lower half of his body, but what he could see, and the way the man moved, gave the impression he was bowlegged. His complexion was like raw meat, almost as if he'd been badly burned long ago.

"I didn't see you there," Carver said, noticing now a paneled door that matched the wall paneling behind the desk.

"I was in back, heard the bell, knowed there was somebody out heah." He had an oddly clipped southern accent yet drew out the last words of his sentences: *heeah.* He leaned scrawny elbows on the desk and grinned with incredibly bad teeth, shooting a look at Carver's cane. "What can I do ya, friend?"

Carver saw now that he had a plastic nametag pinned to his shirt, but it was blank. He immediately named the man "Crusty" in his mind. It fit better than the baggy shirt and pants the man wore. And it certainly went with his faint but acrid odor of stale urine. "You can give me a room."

Crusty looked surprised. Even shocked. "You sure 'bout that?"

"Sure am. This is a motel, right?"

"Well, 'course it is. 'S'cuse my bein' put back on my heels, but this heah's the off-season."

Carver wondered when the "on" season was. And why.

Crusty got a registration card out of a desk drawer and laid it on the counter along with a plastic ballpoint pen that was lettered *Irv's Baits.* "You want smokin' or nonsmokin'?"

Carver thought he had to be kidding, but said, "Smoking. Every once in a while I enjoy a cigar."

"Be eighty-five dollars a night with tax," Crusty said.

"That's steep," Carver commented as he signed the register.

Crusty shrugged. "We're a val'able commodity, bein' the only motel for miles."

"You might be the only anything for miles that doesn't swim or fly."

"Then how come you're heah"—Crusty looked at the registration card—"Mr. Carver from Del Moray?"

"The fishing," Carver said.

Crusty's genuine-looking eye widened. "Not many folks come here for the fishin'."

"No doubt they just come to frolic in the pool," Carver said. "You take Visa?"

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"Nope. Gotta be good ol' U.S. cash money."

Carver got his wallet from his pocket, held it low so Crusty couldn't see its contents, and counted out 850 dollars. The cost of doing business, he thought, and laid the bills on the desk.

Now both of Crusty's eyes bulged. The glass one—if it was glass—threatened to pop out.

"Ten nights in advance," Carver explained. "I always give myself enough time to fish until I catch something."

Crusty took the money and handed him a key with a large red plastic tag with the numeral 10 on it. "End unit, south side," he said.

Carver thanked him and moved toward the door.

"You got one of the rooms with a TV, no extra charge," Crusty said. "Ice machine's down t'other end of the buildin'. Just keep pressin' the button till the ice quits comin' out brown."

"I'll make myself at home," Carver told him and limped out into the sultry afternoon, astounded to realize it was cooler outside than in the office.

Number 10 was a small room with a dresser, a tiny corner desk, and a wall-mounted TV facing a sagging bed. The carpet was threadbare red. The drapes were sun-faded red. The bedspread matched the drapes. An old air conditioner was set in the wall beneath the single window that looked out on the unhealthy hole that was the pool, then across the road to the shadowed and menacing swamp.

Carver tossed his single scuffed-leather suitcase onto the bed, then went over and opened a door, flipped a wall switch that turned on a light, and examined the bathroom. The swimming pool should have prepared him. There was no bathtub, only a shower stall with a pebbled-glass door. The commode and sink were chipped, yellowed porcelain and so similar in design that they looked interchangeable. A fat palmetto bug, unable to bear the light, or maybe its surroundings, scurried along the base of the shower stall and disappeared in a crack in the wall behind the toilet.

I guess I've stayed in worse places, Carver thought, but in truth he couldn't remember when.

As he was unpacking and hanging his clothes in the alcove that passed for a closet, he laid his spare moccasins up on the wooden shelf and felt them hit something, scraping it over the rough wood. He reached back on the shelf and felt something hard that at first he thought was a coin, but it was a brass Aztec calendar,

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about two inches in diameter and with a hole drilled in it off-center, as if to make it wearable on a chain.

Carver stood for a moment wondering what to do with the brass trinket, then tossed it back up on the shelf. People might have been doing that with it for years.

He sat down on the bed and picked up the old black rotary-dial phone. Then he thought better of talking on a line that would undoubtedly be shared by Crusty the innkeeper and replaced the receiver. He decided to drive into town and make his call.

Outside Muggy's Lounge was a public phone, the kind you can park next to and use in your car, if you can park close enough and your arm is long enough. There was a dusty white van parked next to the phone, with no one in it. So Carver parked his ancient Olds convertible on the edge of the graveled lot, climbed out, and limped through the heat to the phone. If the humidity climbed another few degrees, he might be able to swim.

He used his credit card to call Ollie Frist in Del Moray. Frist was a disabled railroad worker who'd retired to Florida ten years ago with his wife and teenage son. The wife had died. The son, Terry, had grown up and become a cop in the Del Moray police department. Terry had come to Mangrove City six months ago, telling anyone who'd asked that he was going on a fishing trip. Ollie Frist had gotten the impression his son was working on something on his own and wanted to learn more before he brought the matter to the attention of his superiors. Two days later Ollie Frist was notified that Terry had been found dead in the swamp outside Mangrove City. At first they'd thought the death was due to natural causes and an alligator had mauled and consumed part of the body afterward. Then the autopsy revealed that the alligator had been the natural cause.

The Del Moray authorities had gotten in touch with the Mangrove City authorities. Accidental death, they decided. The grieving father, Ollie Frist, didn't buy it. What he *had* bought were Carver's services.

"Mr. Frist?" Carver asked when the phone on the other end of the line was picked up.

"It is. That you, Carver?" Frist was hard of hearing and roared rather than spoke.

"Me," Carver said. He knew he could keep his voice at a normal volume; Frist had shown him the special amplifier on the phone in

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his tiny Del Moray cottage. "I'm checked into the motel where Terry stayed."

"It's a dump, right? Terry said when he phoned to let me know where he was staying that the place wasn't four-star."

"Astronomically speaking, it's more of a black hole. Did Terry actually tell you he was coming to this place to fish?"

"That's what he said. I didn't believe it then. Should I believe it now?"

"No. There's some fishing here, I'm sure. But there's probably more poaching. It's the kind of backwater place where most of the population gets by doing this or that, this side of the law or the other."

"You think that's what Terry was onto, some kinda alligator poaching operation?"

"I doubt it. He wouldn't see it as that big a deal, or that unusual. He probably would have just phoned the Mangrove City law if that were the case." A bulky, bearded man wearing jeans and a sleeveless black T-shirt had walked around the dusty white van and was standing and staring at Carver. Maybe waiting to use the phone. "I'll hang around town for a while," Carver said, "see if I can pick up on anything revealing. There's something creepy and very wrong about this place. As of now it's just a sensation I have on the back of my neck, but I've had it before and it's seldom been wrong." The big man next to the van crossed his beefy arms and glared at Carver.

"Keep me posted," Frist shouted into the phone. "Let me know if you need anything at this end."

Carver said he'd do both those things, then hung up the phone.

He set the tip of his cane in the loose gravel and walked past the big man, who didn't move. His muscular arms were covered with the kind of crude, faded blue tattoos a lot of ex-cons sport from their time in prison, and on his right cheek was tattooed a large black spider that appeared to be crawling toward the corner of his eye. He puffed up his chest as Carver limped past him. He probably thought he was tough. Carver knew the type. He probably was tough.

The striking thing about Mangrove City's main street, which was called Cypress Avenue as it ran between the rows of struggling business establishments, was how near the swamp was. Walls of lush green seemed to loom close behind the buildings on each side of the road. Towering cypress and mangrove trees leaned toward each other over the road as if they yearned some-

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day to embrace high above the cracked pavement. The relentless and ratchety hum of insects was background music, and the fetid, rotting, life-and-death stench of the swamp was thick in the air and lay on the tongue like a primal taste.

The humid air felt like warm velvet on his exposed skin as Carver crossed the parking lot and entered Muggy's Lounge.

Ah! In Muggy's, it was cool.

There were early customers scattered among the booths and tables, and a few slumped at the long bar. Carver sat on a stool near the end of the bar and asked the bartender for a Budweiser.

The bartender brought him a can and let Carver open it. He didn't offer a glass. He was a tall, skinny man with a pockmarked face, intent dark eyes set too close together, and a handlebar moustache that was red despite the fact that his hair was brown.

"So whaddya think of our little town?" he asked.

It's conducive to insanity, Carver thought, but he said, "How do you know I'm not from around here?"

The bartender laughed. "There ain't that many folks from around here, and we tend to know each other even if we ain't sleeping together." Someone at the other end of the bar motioned to him and he moved away, wiping his hands on a gray towel tucked in the belt of his cut-off jeans.

Carver sipped his beer and looked around. Muggy's was a surprisingly long building with booths lining the walls beyond where the bar ended. On a shelf high above the bar was a stuffed alligator about five feet long, watching whatever went on with glass eyes that nonetheless seemed bright with evil cunning. There were box speakers mounted every ten feet or so around the edges of the ceiling, tilted downward and aimed at the customers as if they might fire bullets or dispense noxious gas. Right now they were silent. The only sound was the ticking of one of the half-dozen slowly revolving ceiling fans, stirring the air-conditioned atmosphere and moving tobacco smoke around. It occurred to Carver that the clientele in Muggy's might have stopped talking to each other when he walked inside.

The bulky man who'd been watching Carver outside entered the lounge and swaggered toward him. He was about average height but very wide, with muscle rippling under his fat like energy trapped beneath his skin and trying to escape. He smiled thinly at Carver, then sat down on the stool next to him as if using the phone in succession had formed some sort of bond between them.

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When he smiled, the spider tattoo near his eye crinkled. Carver had seen real spiders do that after being sprayed with insecticide.

"You Mr. Fred Carver?" the man asked in a drawl that moved about as fast as the alligator above the bar.

"How did you guess?" Carver asked, continuing to stare straight ahead at the rows of bottles near the beer taps.

"Didn't guess. I was told you checked in at the Glades Inn. I went and talked to the desk clerk, found out who you was."

"Why?"

"Curious. Stranger here's always news. Ain't much happens to amuse us 'round these parts. We take our pleasure when we can."

"You think I'm going to amuse you?"

"You got possibilities fer sure."

Carver decided to meet this cretin head-on. "Ever hear of a man named Terry Frist?"

"Sure. Got his fool self killed and damn near et up by a 'gator a while back. Terrible thing."

"Alligators usually kill their prey, then drag it back to their den at water's edge where they hide it and let it rot until they can tear it apart easier with their teeth. The way I understand it, Terry Frist's body was found on land."

"Yeah. What was left of it. He was a cop, we found out later. From over in Del Moray. Say now, ain't that where you're from?"

Maybe not such a cretin. "It is," Carver said, "but Frist and I didn't know each other. I read in the newspaper about what happened to him here."

"What is it you do for a livin' there in Del Moray?"

"I'm in research. Decided to come here for the fishing."

"Really? We ain't known for the fishin'."

"Didn't I see a bait shop when I drove into town?"

"Oh yeah. Irv's. Well, there's *some* fishin'. More likely you'll catch yourself a 'gator like that Frist fella did. Fishin' suddenly becomes huntin' when that happens, and you ain't the hunter."

The pockmarked bartender came over and asked what the big man was drinking.

"Nothin'." He slid off his stool and looked hard at Carver. "Fishin's no good this time of year at all. Not much reason for you to stay around town."

"I like a challenge."

"You're more'n likely to get one if you go fishin' in them swamp waters."

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"Can I rent an airboat anywhere around here?"

"Nope. Nowheres close, neither. Fella name of Ray Orb rents 'em some miles east, but the swamp's too thick around these parts for airboats to get around in it. I think you best try someplace in an easterly direction." He winked, then turned to leave.

"You didn't mention your name," Carver said.

"I.C. is what I'm called. Last name's Unit. The I.C. stands for Intensive Care." The spider crinkled again as if dying, and I.C. threw back his head and roared out a laugh. Carver watched him swagger out through the door, noticing that all the other customers averted their gazes.

"That his real name?" Carver asked the bartender when I.C. had left.

"He says it is. Nobody much wants to differ with him."

"He as tough as he acts?"

"Oh yeah. Him and his buddies from over at Raiford."

"Raiford? The state penitentiary?"

"That's right. The three of 'em, I.C., Jake Magruder, and Luther Peevy, was in there together after they come down from Georgia and committed some heinous type crime. Some say it was murder. Luther Peevy, his folks died and left him a place nearby, so I guess that's why they all settled in here 'bout a year ago."

"I'll bet the town was happy about that," Carver said.

"This town was never happy," the bartender said and moved away and began wiping down the bar with his gray towel.

Carver finished his beer, then walked around the town for a while before going into its only restaurant, Vanilla's, for lunch, even though it was just eleven o'clock. He was hungry and he was here, and he didn't know if the Glades Inn had a restaurant and didn't want to find out. Crusty was probably the cook.

Though Vanilla's was a weathered clapboard building that leaned on its foundation, it was surprisingly neat and clean inside. Small but heavy wooden tables were grouped evenly beneath a battery of ceiling fans rotating only slightly faster than the ones in Muggy's. There was a small counter and double doors into the kitchen. Carver saw an old green Hamilton-Beach blender behind the counter and wondered if Vanilla's sold milk shakes.

There were two men in white T-shirts and bib overalls at the counter, drinking coffee and eating pie. One of them, a red-headed man wearing a ponytail, turned on his stool, glanced at Carver, then went back to work on his apple pie. They seemed

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to be the only other warm bodies in Vanilla's.

" 'Nilla!" the redheaded man yelled. "You got yourself a customer."

The double doors opened and a heavyset, perspiring woman in her fifties emerged from the kitchen. She had a florid complexion, weary blue eyes, and wispy gray hair that stuck out above one ear as if she'd slept too long on that side. She was wearing maroon slacks and a white blouse and apron and had a faint moustache. "Sit anywhere you want," she told Carver in a hoarse voice as deep as a man's.

He was aware of her looking at his cane as he limped to a table near the wall, well away from the counter. Fly-specked menus were propped between the salt and pepper shakers. He opened one and saw that the selection was limited.

Vanilla came over with an order pad and Carver asked for a club sandwich. Then he asked her if she served milk shakes and she said she did. He said chocolate.

"Why do people call you Vanilla?" he asked when she returned with his food and a thick milk shake, half in a glass, half remaining in the cold metal container that had fit onto the mixer.

"I used to be a blonde," she said simply, then put his lunch on the table and went back into the kitchen.

Carver had eaten a few bites of the sandwich when he heard the door open and close. He looked in that direction and saw that a uniformed cop had come in, a short, obese, sixtyish man in a neatly pressed blue uniform with a gold badge on his chest.

He waddled directly to Carver's table. "I'm Mangrove City Police Chief Jerry Gordon," the cop said. He was one of those very fat men who breathe hard all the time, even when they speak.

Carver shook hands with Gordon and invited him to sit down.

"You're Fred Carver from Del Moray," Gordon said, settling his soft and wheezing bulk into the chair across the table from Carver.

"Your job to know," Carver said, unsurprised. Everyone in town apparently knew his name and where he lived.

"It is that." Gordon smiled. "You're the only guest out at the Glades Inn. Only outsider in town, matter of fact. So you're bound to be noticed. We ain't exactly Miami here, Mr. Carver."

"I guess you were told I'm here for the fishing," Carver said.

"Oh, sure. I got a yuk out of that. Most folks'd rather drop a line in water where there's more likely to be fish than something that's gonna eat their bait then have them for dessert."

"There must be some *good* fishing. Terry Frist came here a

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while back. He usually knew where they were biting." A different lie for Gordon. He'd told I.C. Unit he hadn't known Frist in Del Moray. Which had been the truth. Or part of the truth. The useful thing about lies was that they were so adaptable.

Chief Gordon gave Carver a dead-eyed, level look, the kind cops were so good at. "Way I recall it, Terry Frist didn't catch nothin' but a big ol' 'gator. I'd be careful walkin' in his footsteps."

"Are you warning me to be careful in and out of the swamp, Chief?"

"Cautionin' you, is the way I think of it." He put his elbows on the table and leaned toward Carver. "I gotta tell you, there's some angry people out there, in and around the swamp, all through these parts."

"Angry at what?"

"Ever'thin' from violence on TV an' in the movies to supermarket bar codes. You don't wanna do no verbal joustin' with 'em. We got folks around here, Mr. Carver, would shoot you dead over violence on TV."

"You think that's what happened to Terry Frist? An argument over politics or the price of something in produce?"

"I think somebody shoulda warned Terry Frist. I read he was a cop. Maybe he was workin' undercover, an' this was no place for him to be."

"Maybe he found out about something. Say, a drug-smuggling operation."

Chief Gordon grinned. "Why, you're fishin' already, Mr. Carver."

"Maybe. But Mangrove City's near enough to the coast that drug shipments from the sea could be brought here by airboat through the swamp, and the law would never be able to figure out the routes or the timing. A cop—as you say, maybe working undercover—was killed here recently. And I met I.C. Unit this morning in Muggy's and was told he's part of a set and recently of the Union Correctional Institution over in Raiford. And now here you are . . ."

"The local cop on the take?" Gordon didn't seem angry at the suggestion, which made Carver curious. "That's so preposterous I ain't even gonna respond to it, Mr. Carver, except to say we got creatures in the swamp more deadly than any 'gator. Maybe one of 'em killed Terry Frist."

"And you don't want to be next, is that it?"

"Nor do I want you to be, Mr. Carver. I.C. and that Peevy and

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Magruder, those are bad men. A 'gator grab one of 'em an' it'd spit him right out. I did feel compelled to warn you, an' now I have." Chief Gordon shoved back his chair and stood up, tucking in his blue shirt around his bulging stomach.

Carver felt sorry for him. He was past his prime and dealing with local toughs who had him and the rest of Mangrove City under their collective greasy thumb.

"Do you think Terry Frist was murdered?" Carver asked.

Again Chief Gordon was impassive. "What all I think publicly, it's all in my report, Mr. Carver. If you're really serious about doin' any fishin' while you're here, you oughta see Irv down at his bait shop. He'll tell you where they're bitin' an' you might not get bit back." He raised a pudgy forefinger and wagged it at Carver. "You remember I said might." He turned and waddled out, swinging his elbows wide to clear his holstered revolver and the clutter of gear attached to his belt.

Carver poked his straw into the thick milk shake and took a long sip. It was the best thing he'd encountered since arriving in Mangrove City.

That afternoon, Carver set out from the Glades Inn wearing loose-fitting green rubber boots, old jeans, a black pullover shirt, and half a tube of mosquito repellent. He carried a casting rod and wore a slouch cap with an array of colorful feathered lures hooked into it. He hadn't been fishing for years and didn't really know much about it, but he figured if his cover story was fishing, he'd better fish. Maybe he'd even catch something.

Irv of Irv's Baits seemed to know a lot about fishing and had recommended his night crawlers, explaining to Carver that it took the fattest, juiciest worms to catch the biggest fish. Carver thought that made an elemental kind of sense and bought two dozen of the wriggling monsters squirming around in an old take-out fried chicken bucket half full of rich black loam.

He loaded all of this into the cavernous trunk of the Olds, then drove along the road toward town until he came to a turnoff he'd noticed on his previous trip.

The narrow gravel road soon became even narrower, and the gravel became mud that threatened to bog down the big car's rear wheels. Carver braked the Olds to a stop and turned off the engine. Silence somehow made deeper by the ceaseless drone of insects closed in. Off to his right, through dense foliage shadowed

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by overhead tree limbs and draped Spanish moss, he saw the dull green sheen of water.

He climbed out of the Olds, got his rod and reel and bucket of worms from the trunk, then muddied the tip of his cane as he limped from what was left of the road and trudged in his boots toward the water. His motion made sensory waves in the swamp. The humming insect tone varied slightly at his passing. He heard soft and abrupt watery sounds and the quick and startled beat of wings.

When he reached a likely spot, he stopped, placed the bucket on a tree stump, and stood in the shade. He disengaged the barbed hook from the cork handle of his casting rod, used it to impale one of Irv's ill-fated night crawlers, and moved slightly to the side. Careful not to snag his line on nearby branches, he used the weight of the bait, a small lead sinker, and a red and white plastic float to cast toward a clear circle of water in the shade of an ancient cypress tree. Line whirred out, there was a faint *plop!* and Carver was ready to reel in a fish.

Irv's worm must have loafed underwater. Nothing happened for about fifteen minutes. Then the red and white float bobbed, went completely underwater, and Carver reeled in an empty hook.

So what did it matter? He was really here to establish himself as a genuine fisherman, in case anyone might be watching him. He reached into the bucket for another worm.

The fishing got better at the spot Carver had chosen. It took him only about an hour to feed the fish the rest of Irv's worms. He removed the fishing cork, cut the leader line above the hook and sinker, then selected the feathered and multiple-barbed Oh Buggie! lure and unhooked it from his cap. He attached it to the line, cast it to where he'd lost all his worms, and almost immediately a fish took it.

Carver reeled in a tiny carp. Since he didn't like to clean fish, and this one was too small to keep anyway, he worked the hook from its mouth and tossed it back. Catch and release, he thought, hoping that wouldn't happen with whoever killed Terry Frist.

He caught nothing the rest of the afternoon. That evening he drove into town and had the family meatloaf special at Vanilla's, then stopped in at Muggy's for a beer before driving back to the motel. He saw no sign of I.C. Unit or his two confederates and was pretty much ignored by the townspeople. They saw him yet they didn't, as if someone had planted in them the posthypnotic sug-

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gestion that he didn't exist, and there was a short-circuit between their eyes and their brains that made him invisible to them.

That night Carver awoke in his bed in the Glades Inn to an odd, snarling sound outside in the dark. He lay on his back in total blackness, his fingers laced behind his head, and realized he was listening to the sound of an airboat deep in the swamp. Maybe one of Ray Orb's boats. But according to I.C. Unit, Orb didn't operate in this part of the swamp because it was too dense and dangerous. And how could you not believe I.C.?

Carver fell back asleep listening to the faraway sound of the airboat and dreamed that it was a gigantic insect droning in the swamp. In the dawn and the halfway country between waking and sleep, he thought maybe his dream was possible.

It was more possible, he decided when fully awake, that the late-night droning from the swamp was indeed an airboat's engine, and the cargo was illegal narcotics.

Carver established a routine over the next five days, not doing much other than fishing with rod and reel and Oh Buggie!, going to secluded fishing spots in the evenings and staying late, tossing his infrequent catches back into the water. Carrying his fishing gear, he explored the swamp around Mangrove City. Though he came across tracks in the mud once, he never saw an alligator. And he didn't again hear the snarl of an airboat engine in the night.

Until the sixth night, when he was standing ankle-deep in water near the gnarled roots of a mangrove and heard the sudden roar of an engine, as if a boat that had been drifting nearby had abruptly started up. A light flashed, the swinging beam of a searchlight illuminating the swamp, and for an instant through the trees he saw the shimmering whir of an airboat's rear-mounted propeller spinning in its protective cage as it powered the flat-bottomed boat over the water. Judging by the size of the prop and cage, it was a large boat. Carver heard voices, then a single shouted word: *"Cuidado!"* A man yelling in Spanish to whoever was steering the boat to be careful, probably of some looming obstacle the light had revealed.

Carver stood motionless until the snarling engine had faded to silence. He could still hear water lapping in the boat's wake, even see ripples that had found their way to the moonlit patch of algae and floating debris where he was pretending to fish.

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He reeled in Oh Buggie! and a tangle of weed, then returned to where the Olds was parked and drove back to the motel.

Maybe tonight he'd finally caught something.

After showering away mosquito repellent and swamp mud, he put on a fresh pair of boxer shorts, made sure the room's air conditioner was on high, then went to the alcove closet. He reached up on the shelf and found the half-dollar-size bronze Aztec calendar again and stood staring at it. No one knew for sure that the ancient circular Aztec design actually was a calendar. It was only a theory.

Carver stared at the trinket, then placed it back on the shelf. Now he had a theory, and one he believed in. Tomorrow he'd do something about it.

He sat on the edge of the sagging mattress, flicked the wall switch off with his cane, and dropped back on the bed in the warm darkness. With so much resolved, and with a clear course of action before him, he dozed off immediately and slept deeply.

He sensed it was toward morning when he dreamed again of the giant insect droning in the swamp. Only this time he was surprised to hear it buzz his name.

Abruptly he realized someone was in the room speaking to him. Without moving any other part of his body, he opened his eyes.

I.C. Unit was standing at the foot of the bed. He was holding a shotgun casually so that it was pointed at Carver.

"Carver. Carver. You best wake up. You're gonna go fishin' early this mornin'. Gonna get yourself an early start well afore sunrise. Ain't no need for you to worry about bringin' any bait."

Carver knew why. He was going to *be* bait. And not for fish.

At I.C.'s direction, he climbed out of bed and dressed in jeans and a pullover shirt, then put on his green rubber boots. His fishing outfit.

"Don't forget your rod and reel," I.C. said. "Gotta make this look realistic. Hell, maybe we'll even let you catch a fish."

When they went outside, Carver met Peevy and Magruder. There were no introductions and none were necessary. Peevy was a short man with a beer gut and a pug face. He was tattooed, like I.C., with the crude blue ink imagery of the amateur prison artist without adequate equipment. Magruder was tall and thin, with a droopy moustache and tragic dark eyes. Each man was armed with a semiautomatic twelve-gauge shotgun like I.C.'s. Their

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shells were probably loaded with heavy lead slugs rather than pellets, the rounds used by poachers to kill large and dangerous alligators. Awesome weapons at close range.

"He don't look like much," Magruder said in a southern drawl that sounded more like Tennessee than Georgia.

"Gonna look like less soon," Peevy said in the same flat drawl. He dug the barrel of his shotgun into the small of Carver's back, prodding him toward the parked Olds.

I.C. laughed. "Shucks, that's 'cause there's gonna *be* less of him."

Peevy drove the Olds, and I.C. sat in back with his shotgun aimed at Carver, who sat in front and wondered if he could incapacitate Peevy with a jab of his cane, then deal with I.C. and the shotgun. But he knew the answer to that one and didn't like it. Magruder followed, driving a dented black pickup truck with a camper shell mounted on its bed. As they pulled out of the Glades Inn parking lot, Carver was sure he saw a light in the office go out.

"You weren't smuggling drugs," Carver said, as they bumped over the rutted road. "You were bringing in illegal aliens from Mexico."

"From there and all over Central America," I.C. said. Now that Carver knew, he was bragging. Nothing to lose. "Boat from Mexico transfers 'em to airboats on the coast, and we know the swamp well enough to boat 'em in here. The Glades Inn is the next stop, where they pay the rest of what they owe and then are moved by car and truck on north."

"And if they can't pay?"

I.C. laughed hard and Carver felt spittle and warm breath on the back of his neck. "That's the same question that poor Terry Frist asked. Answer is, if they can't pay, they don't go no farther north."

"Nor any other direction," Peevy added, wrestling with the steering wheel as they negotiated a series of ruts.

"And Terry Frist?" Carver asked.

" 'Gator got him, all right," was all I.C. said.

Peevy smiled as he drove.

They wound through the night along roads so narrow that foliage brushed the Olds's sides. Finally they reached the most desolate of Carver's fishing spots, a pool of still water glistening black in the moonlight, its edges overgrown with tall reeds and sawgrass.

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As soon as they'd stopped, I.C. prodded the back of Carver's neck as an instruction to get out of the car. Carver climbed out slowly, feeling the hot, humid night envelop him, listening to the desperate screams of nocturnal insects. Magruder parked the pickup behind the Olds, then climbed out and walked forward to join them. The only illumination was from the parking lights on the Olds.

While I.C. held his shotgun to Carver's head, Magruder looped a steel chain around the ankle of Carver's right boot and fastened it in place with a padlock. Then he shoved him toward the center of the shallow pool of water. Carver noticed a thick cedar post protruding from the water.

When they reached the knee-deep center of the pool, Magruder strung the chain through a hole in the post, wrapped it tight around the thick wood, then used another padlock to secure it. He clipped his key ring back onto one of his belt loops, then stepped back. Peevy was standing nearby, his shotgun aimed at Carver.

I.C. handed Carver the casting rod. "You hold onto your prop here," he said, then snatched Carver's cane away and effortlessly snapped the hard walnut over his knee. He let both ends of the splintered cane drop into the water.

"The desk clerk at the Glades Inn knows you left with me," Carver said. "He's probably already called Chief Gordon."

"He knows ever'thin'," I.C. said. "So's Chief Gordon know, though he don't like to let on, even to his own self."

Both men backed away from Carver, leaving him standing alone and unable to move more than a foot or so in any direction.

"You wanna pass the time fishin'," I.C. said, "you go right ahead. Now us, we gotta drive back into town and do some minor mischief, establish an alibi. Magruder'll stay here an' keep you company till you don't need no company. He ain't afraid of the dark, and he likes to watch."

"Watch what?"

"This here's a special part of the swamp, Carver. It ain't at all far from where that Terry Frist fella got hisself tore all to hell by a 'gator. This here area is crawlin' with 'gators. They figured out some way in their mean little brains that there's plenty to eat here from time to time."

I.C. and Peevy sloshed through the dark water and onto damp but solid ground. "We gonna be back to pick up Magruder later," I.C. said without bothering to look at Carver. He and Peevy

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climbed into the cab of the battered black pickup and the engine kicked over.

When the old truck had rattled its way out of sight, Magruder sat himself down on a stump about fifty feet away from Carver and settled his shotgun across his knees.

"Now then," he said, "you go ahead and fish if you want. You an' me's jus' gonna wait a while an' see who catches who."

Carver stood leaning against the post driven into the earth beneath the water. He knew it was firm, driven deep or maybe even set in concrete, and the locks and chain were unbreakable. He stared into the dark swamp around him, listening to the drone of insects, the gentle deadly sounds of things stirring in the night. Though he told himself to be calm, his heart was hammering. He glanced over at Magruder, who had a lighted cigarette stuck in his mouth now and smiled at him.

When Magruder was on his third cigarette, there was a low, guttural grunt from the dark, and off to the side water sloshed as something ponderous moved. Carver looked down and saw the water around his knees rippling. He tried swallowing his terror, tried desperately to think, but fear was like sand in the machinery of his mind.

The tall black grass stirred, and something low and long emerged. Carver knew immediately what it was.

The huge 'gator slithered out into plain view in the moonlight, sloshed around until it was at a slight angle to him, and regarded him with a bright, primitive eye.

"Sure is a big 'un!" Magruder said, obviously amused.

The 'gator switched its tail, churning the water. Carver's heart went cold. He wielded the casting rod like a weapon, as if that might help him.

And it might.

He made himself stop trembling, turned his body, and leaned hard against the post, setting his good leg tight to it.

The 'gator gave its fearsome, guttural grunt again.

"Hungry!" Magruder commented, looking from Carver to the 'gator with a sadist's keen anticipation.

Carver raised the casting rod, whipping it backward then forward. The line whirred out and fell across Magruder's shoulder. Carver reeled fast as Magruder reached for the thin but strong line. It simply played through his fingers, cutting them. He yanked his hand away and Carver gave the rod a sharp backward

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tug, feeling the Oh Buggie! with its many barbed hooks set deep in the side of Magruder's neck.

Magruder yelped and jumped up in surprise, the shotgun dropping to the ground. He reached down for the shotgun but Carver yanked hard on the rod, pulling him off balance and making him yelp again in pain. He'd stumbled a few steps toward Carver, and now he couldn't get back to the gun.

Carver began reeling him in.

Magruder didn't want to come. He tried to work the lure loose from where it clung like a large insect to the side of his neck, but each time Carver would yank the rod and pain would jolt through him. The alligator was still and watching with what seemed mild interest.

Carver had Magruder stumbling steadily toward him now, led by excruciating pain. Magruder raised his right hand and tried frantically to loosen the barbed hooks, but found he couldn't withdraw the hand. It was hooked now too, held fast to the side of his neck. Blood ran in a black trickle down his wrist. With his free hand he removed the cigarette stuck to his lower lip and tried to hold the ember to the fishing line to burn through it. Carver yanked harder on the rod, and the cigarette dropped to the water. Magruder was splashing around now, falling, struggling to his feet, fighting to pull away.

And something else was splashing.

Carver looked over and saw the massive low form of the alligator gliding toward him.

Magruder was still fifty feet away.

The alligator was about the same distance away but closing fast, cutting a wake with its ugly blunt snout, its impassive gaze trained on Carver.

Carver began screaming as he worked frantically with the reel. In the back of his mind was the idea that noise might discourage the alligator. And Magruder was screaming now, thrashing panic-stricken in the shallow water.

The alligator hissed and slapped the water with its tail, sending spray high enough to drum down for a few seconds like rain.

Carver and Magruder screamed louder.

The dented black pickup truck approached slowly and parked in the moonlight beside the still water.

I.C. and Peevy climbed down from the cab and slammed the

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doors shut behind them almost in unison. They stood carrying their shotguns slung beneath their right arms.

"Been paid a visit here," Peevy said, motioning with his head toward the two lower legs and boots jutting up from the bloody water. It was obvious from the shallow depth of the water and the angle of the legs that they were attached to nothing. Other than the right leg, with the padlock and chain around its booted ankle.

"Magruder!" Peevy called.

"Will you look at that!" I.C. said. He pointed with his shotgun toward the huge alligator near the water's edge, its jaws gaping.

Neither man said anything for at least a minute, standing and staring at the alligator, their shotguns trained on it.

"Ain't movin'," Peevy said after a while.

I.C. dragged the back of his forearm across his mouth. "C'mon."

"Don't like it," Peevy said, advancing a few steps behind I.C. toward the motionless alligator.

"Nothin' here to like," I.C said.

When they were ten feet away from the alligator they saw the black glistening holes in the side of its head, from the lead slugs Magruder used in his shotgun rounds.

Then they saw something else. The alligator's jaws were gaping because they were propped open with something—a stick or branch?

No, a cane! A broken half of a cane!

I.C. whirled and looked again at the booted legs jutting from the bloody surface of the barely stirred water.

"Them boots got laces!" he said. "Crippled man didn't have no laces in his boots! He musta somehow got Magruder's keys off'n him, then his gun!"

He and Peevy turned in the direction of a slight metallic click in the blackness near the edge of the pond, a sound not natural to the swamp. Together they raised their shotguns toward their shoulders to aim them at the source of the sound.

But Carver already had them in his sights. He squeezed the trigger over and over until the shotgun's magazine was empty.

In the vibrating silence after the explosion of gunshots, he heard only the beating of wings as startled, nested birds took flight into the black sky. They might have been the departing souls of I.C. and Peevy, only they were going in the wrong direction.

Using the empty shotgun for a cane, Carver limped out of the swamp. ●

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The Case of the Easter Bonnet

by Peter Lovesey

Peter Lovesey's police detective Peter Diamond is back for a second appearance in *EQMM* in what is perhaps his shortest case ever. For readers who find him intriguing, a new book-length adventure, *Bloodhounds*, is available from The Mysterious Press. *EQMM* will also feature a new Peter Diamond novella in the May '97 issue.

Good Friday, 1995. In their usual box at the Theatre Royal, John and Olga Hitchman were enjoying the new production of *The Seagull* unaware that a thief had just forced his way into their mansion on Lyncombe Hill. There would be rich pickings. The Hitchman family had made millions out of Bath stone and expanded into mineral extraction worldwide. John had succeeded his father as company chairman.

The thief was a high earner in his own line, a top professional, identified only by the name the press had given him: Macavity. "For when they reach the scene of crime—Macavity's not there!" runs the line in T. S. Eliot's poem. Burglar alarms and security lights didn't inhibit this cat burglar one bit. In the previous six months he had neutralised four expensive systems in the Bath area and profited by upwards of fifty thousand pounds. He picked his victims shrewdly, studied their routine, and struck when they were not at home. He knew what he was after this time: Olga Hitchman was from a Russian émigré family. She owned a Fabergé egg her great-grandmother had been given by the tsarina as an Easter gift in 1911. Gold, of course, intricately crafted, enamelled, and inset with emeralds and rubies, it was insured for a six-figure sum.

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It was to be Macavity's present to his partner Jenny. Her Easter egg.

Eventually he found the correct combination and removed the prize from the safe. The job had taken under two hours. He had left no prints and he took nothing else. He was out and into his black Alfa Romeo and away along the drive. Another coup for Macavity. Except that on his way downstairs he passed through a sensor he hadn't been aware of. It triggered an alarm at Manvers Street Police Station, and a response vehicle passing down Wellsway was diverted to the house.

With screeching tyres the police car turned into the long drive leading up to the Hitchman residence. Macavity met them almost head-on. His reaction was swift. He veered left onto the turf to bypass them. His powerful engine roared, he swung onto the road, and accelerated. The police had to turn to give chase, and he got away.

Bath's outsize detective, Superintendent Peter Diamond, ambled up the drive next morning and looked at the tracks the car had made. "Our mystery car made a mess on your lawn, I see," he remarked lightheartedly to John Hitchman, who was unamused.

Those tracks were useful. The police were able to get a clear tread pattern and establish which tyres had been fitted to the car. Moreover, the driver of the patrol car was convinced that the thief had been driving an Alfa Romeo sports model. The Police National Computer carries records of all registered cars. The Alfa Romeos of that type in the Bath area can be counted on one hand.

Towards noon, Diamond drove over the cobbles in front of the Royal Crescent and found a space two cars away from a black Alfa Romeo. All other enquiries had proved negative.

This Easter weekend had turned out fine, but chilly, particularly on the exposed slope where the Crescent is sited. Diamond stood rubbing his arms by the sports car while the sergeant compared the tread pattern on the tyres. "No chance, I'm afraid," the sergeant said finally.

"You're certain?"

"These are another make altogether, sir. Mind you, they're new. They've still got some shreds of rubber where they were taken from the mould. It's worth asking when these were fitted."

A man in a blue sweatshirt and black jeans answered the door and before Diamond had opened his mouth said, "Piss off, will you? Out of it. Get some fresh air."

It was only when Diamond felt some pressure against his leg

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that he realized the remarks were meant for a cat, a large ginger tom that was trying to return indoors. The man put a foot against its rump and steered it away from the door. "You've got to be firm with them," he said. "I don't want it cluttering up the flat all day."

Diamond explained who he was. The young man, whose name was Mark Bonney, invited him in. He introduced Diamond to his partner, a dark-haired woman in a denim suit. She offered to make coffee.

In the next twenty minutes, Bonney insisted that he had not been out at all the previous evening. He had watched a video with his partner and they had retired early. He had not used his Alfa Romeo since Thursday, two days before.

"I was looking at the tyres," said Diamond. "They're brand new. Changed them recently, did you?"

"Thursday afternoon," said Bonney. "Want to look at the receipt? It's right here."

It was from Tyrefast in Weston and the date was clearly written as 13/4/95. Thursday. The robbery had been on Friday evening.

"That seems to settle it," Diamond had to concede. "I've no further questions, Mr. Bonney. Thanks for the coffee."

After the door was closed, Bonney and his partner watched discreetly from the window as the portly detective walked across to his colleague, shaking his head.

"You're brilliant," Jenny said. She had taken out the Fabergé egg and was holding it to her chest. "Brilliant! How did you manage it?"

"Manage what?"

"The receipt. You had the new tyres fitted only half an hour ago, for God's sake."

"No problem," said Bonney, putting an arm around her. "I changed the date myself as soon as I was given the receipt. The lad wrote his 5 like a letter S. All it needed was an extra stroke across the top. Now they're convinced I haven't used the car since Thursday."

They watched Diamond return to the police car, still shaking his head. Before getting in, he hesitated.

"What's he staring at?" said Jenny.

"My car," said Bonney. "Oh, Jesus! That bloody cat!"

The ginger tom was sitting forlornly on the Alfa Romeo, pressing itself against the still faintly warm bonnet.

Diamond strolled across and put his hand flat to the bonnet. Then he gestured to the sergeant and they approached the house and knocked again.

Macavity was about to be nicked. ●

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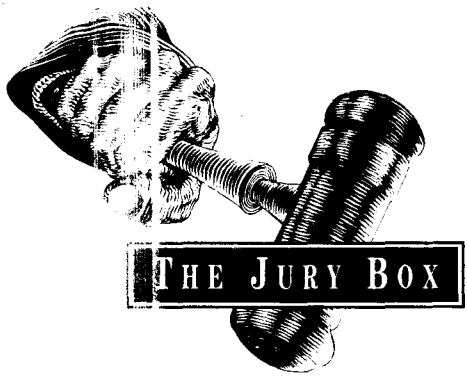

by Jon L. Breen

The history of gay male and lesbian detectives in fiction offers an interesting study in gender and literary politics. Though historically lesbianism has been less of a taboo in fiction for general publication than male homosexuality—indeed lesbian relationships were the subject of mass-market paperbacks in the fifties by Vin Packer and others—the earliest lesbian detectives (Joyce Porter's non-explicit stereotype the Hon. Con. being a comic exception) came from specialty feminist publishers, while pioneering gay male sleuths like George Baxt's Pharaoh Love (first appearance 1966) and Joseph Hansen's Dave Brandstetter (1970) debuted with major New York houses. The different paths probably reflect the historical preference for male detectives, though not necessarily for male writers, that existed until relatively recently.

Only when Sandra Scoppettone's Lauren Laurano made her first appearance in *Everything You Have is Mine* (Little Brown, 1991) did an up-front lesbian detective have a major American publisher. Now Katherine V. Forrest's L.A. cop Kate Delafield, who first appeared in *Amateur City* (Naiad, 1984) has moved from small press to mainstream. Considered below are the latest cases for Laurano and Delafield, followed by a strong case for a gay male sleuth originally developed for a specialist publisher and now playing in the majors, Michael Nava's Henry Rios.

*** Sandra Scoppettone: *Let's Face the Music and Die,* Little Brown, $21.95. If you love New York novels, the keen observations found in the present-tense narrative of Manhattan private eye Lauren Laurano should delight you. Her quest for the murderer of a friend's aunt,

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while watching her relationship with her therapist lover decline, exploring a possible new friendship begun via e-mail, and (in a disposable subplot that adds more length than anything else) being menaced by a released criminal who raped her years before, makes for a fast-reading, amusing, and emotionally affecting whodunit.

*** Katherine V. Forrest: *Liberty Square,* Berkley, $21.95. Kate Delafield's youthful lover almost has to trick her into attending the Washington, D.C. reunion of old colleagues (male and female, gay and straight) from her days as a Marine lieutenant in Vietnam. Forrest spins a nifty puzzle, but as always she has more on her mind, including the contribution of women and gays to America's war effort and the nation's general attitude to those who fought that most unpopular of wars.

**** Michael Nava: *The Death of Friends,* Putnam, $22.95. In his fifth appearance, Chicano lawyer Rios watches a former lover waste away from AIDS and finds himself representing the accused killer of another old friend, a Superior Court judge and closeted homosexual. Nava spins a deceptive whodunit plot, details legal battles from an expert's perspective, and brings a large cast of characters to vivid life.

*** Dick Francis: *To the Hilt,* Putnam, $24.95. Is any writer in the field more reliable for absorbing entertainment than ex-jockey Francis? The novel about reclusive Scottish artist Alexander Kinloch, called away from his painting to save his ailing stepfather's financially troubled brewery and the rich steeplechase it annually sponsors, may not be among Francis's best, but they're all good and (for me at least) this one is a cut above his 1995 Edgar winner, *Come to Grief.*

*** Val Davis: *Track of the Scorpion,* St. Martin's, $22.95. Historical archaeologist Nicolette (Nick) Scott uncovers a World War II bomber apparently shot down decades ago in the New Mexico desert. The puzzle of how it got there, the problems it causes its discoverer, and the extent to which some will go to cover the truth up will keep you turning the pages of this model thriller. Davis is the joint pseudonym of *EQMM* contributors Robert and Angie Irvine.

*** Jenefer Shute: *Sex Crimes,* Doubleday, $18.95. Boston attorney Christine Chandler, who tells her own story augmented by witness statements, news articles, and a radio talk show transcript, is accused in a tabloid cause celebre of maiming former lover Scott DeSalvo. The exact terrifying nature of

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the mayhem is only gradually revealed. If you worry about such things, you may find this brief, deft novel more mainstream or "literary" fiction than crime fiction, but wherever you place it, the gradual revelation of character, the central ambiguity, and the haunting final line should stick with you.

*** J.D. Christilian: *Scarlet Women,* Fine, $22.95. If you missed this solid historical mystery, about an 1870's New York private eye known as Harp, when it came out early in 1996, check your public library. Like many novels recreating the period, it has a theme of the role of women in constricting Victorian society. Both the period detail and the complex plot of prostitution, spiritualism, and civic corruption are praiseworthy. Sadly, though, there may not be a follow-up, since Christilian was one of many pseudonyms employed by the versatile creator of Tony Rome, Marvin H. Albert, who died early last year.

I once wrote a mystery novel, *Touch of the Past* (Walker, 1988), about the murder of a man who collected artefacts of a single year: 1937. Though I chose it because it was the year of my parents' marriage, not for its eventfulness, it was a fascinating year in a number of fields, including mystery fiction, as seen in two 1937 classics just reissued by Carroll & Graf: Eric Ambler's espionage thriller *A Coffin for Dimitrios* ($8.95 trade paperback) and Margery Allingham's *Dancers in Mourning* ($4.95 mass market), a theatrical mystery starring Albert Campion.

If your interest in books involves collecting as well as reading them, you should be aware of the handsomely produced magazine *Firsts* (P.O. Box 65166, Tucson, AZ 85728-5166; $40 per year [11 issues], single copies $4.50). The November 1996 issue is of special interest for John Mitchell's article on the history of *EQMM,* including reproductions of the covers of the first (Fall 1941) and several other early issues, plus pieces on two notable and collectible American mystery writers of decades past, also frequent *EQMM* contributors, Craig Rice and Stuart Palmer. Selections from Palmer's letters to Frederic Dannay (half of the Ellery Queen team and this magazine's editor from the beginning to 1982) concerning a series of Palmer/Rice collaborations are especially interesting. ●

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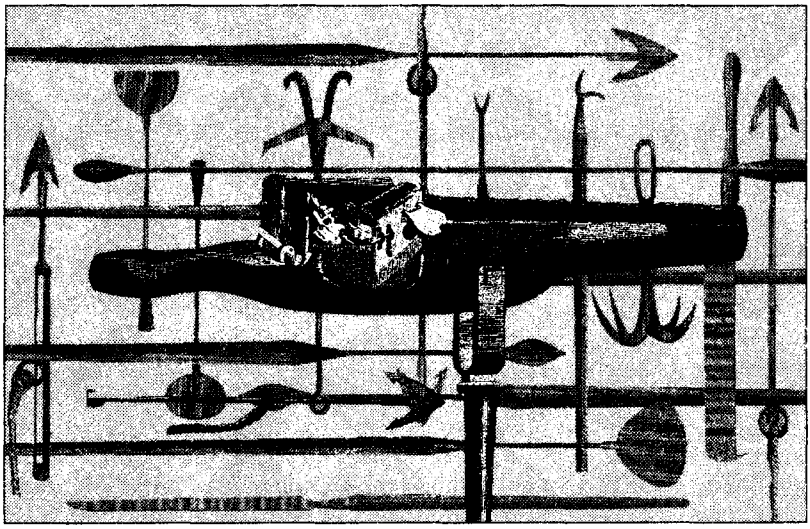

Art by Anthony Bari

The Problem of the Enchanted Terrace

by Edward D. Hoch

The war was a terrible thing (Dr. Sam Hawthorne was saying as he refilled his visitor's glass), but in the autumn of 1939 America still hadn't felt its full fury. Though the president had declared our neutrality in the European war on September fifth, he proclaimed a state of limited national emergency three days later. German U-boats were active in the North Atlantic all through those early months, and the British liner Athenia, bound for Canada, became the first of many ships to be sunk.

In Northmont, life went on pretty much as it always had. My nurse Mary Best and I had been invited by friends to accompany them on a drive through southern New England to view the fall

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foliage. When a new young doctor named Harry Gilbert offered to look after my patients for a few days, such a trip began to seem practical. I'd never been a great one for vacations, but Mary convinced me we could drive up to Cape Cod and back without being missed. "Sam, a year from now we might be in a war," she argued. "Let's get away while we can."

So we set out with Winston and Ellen Vance in their new sedan, heading southeast across Connecticut and Rhode Island so that they could stop at New Bedford to visit a friend of Ellen's who'd just opened a Melville museum there. Winston Vance was an art dealer from Hartford who had a small farm in Northmont. He and his wife spent their vacations and most summer weekends at the farm. I'd become his country doctor when he suffered a mild case of heart palpitations during one such visit, and after Mary Best became friendly with Ellen, the four of us ended up having dinner together once a month or so. This was the first time we'd gone on an overnight trip with them. They had a son in high school and were starting to think of a college for him. I hoped the war in Europe wouldn't interfere with those plans.

Writes critic William DeAndrea: "Colleagues have suggested to Ed Hoch, not entirely in jest, that he leave his brain to science. That brain enables him to do something no one else has been able to do since the death of the PULPS: make a living as a full-time writer of mystery short stories." Here's his 767th story!

Ellen was younger than her husband, and younger than me, for that matter. I guessed her to be in her mid thirties; she still had a girlish figure and a giddy manner left over from the Roaring Twenties. Sometimes I would kid her about being the only flapper left alive, but I did enjoy her company. "Too bad she's happily married," Mary would chide me following her occasional office visits, when I sat grinning behind my desk.

"She cheers me up," I answered defensively. "Nothing wrong with that."

"I'll have to take lessons from her," Mary said, retreating to her desk.

On our auto tour through an autumn wonderland of golden leaves, Winston did all the driving. He seemed to enjoy the outdoors, and we stopped frequently to gaze off at some particularly

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splendid view. "I know an artist in New York who could paint that magnificently," he told us.

"I know just who you're thinking of," Ellen joined in. "Archie Quain."

He nodded. "But the future of art doesn't belong to the realists. Nothing can be more real than photography. Ten, twenty years from now the great paintings will be abstracts. Surrealists like Dali will reign supreme."

"Maybe," I answered a bit uncertainly. Arguing modern art was not one of my strong points and I was glad later in the day when we crossed over into Massachusetts and spotted the first sign directing us to Fall River and then on to New Bedford. The road was bumpy here and the autumn rains had left puddles of water for Winston to splash through.

"Let's get our rooms first," he suggested. "Then we'll locate the museum and go see your friend, Ellen." We found suitable lodging at a motel near the shore and then headed for the museum.

New Bedford had been an important whaling port from about 1820 until the beginning of the Civil War. It was here that Herman Melville had boarded his first whaling ship, the Acushnet, in January of 1841. It didn't matter that he and a friend had deserted the ship in the South Pacific eighteen months later. The seeds of *Moby Dick* had been planted in his mind. I learned all this later that afternoon when we arrived at the Melville Museum on Dartmouth Street. It was an old two-story house with a traditional widow's walk on top, and I imagined a lonely nineteenth-century wife pacing up there for the first sighting of her husband's incoming ship. As we entered I caught the musty odor of an old building, not quite covered by the fresh paint job.

We were welcomed by Ellen's friend, who proved to be an old school chum named Martin Faulk. He was tall and muscular, with a few strands of gray in his otherwise coal-black hair. I wondered if the gray was premature or if I'd guessed too low in estimating Ellen Vance's age. "God, Ellen," he said, giving her a hug, "you look just like you did the day we graduated from high school!"

She laughed appreciatively. "Thanks for the fib, Martin. This is my husband, Winston Vance."

Winston shook hands, already sizing up the place. "Glad to meet you, Martin, after all my wife has told me about her school days. How long have you been open here?"

"About three months. We opened the Fourth of July weekend."

"Do you live here too?"

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"No, it's all museum. I have a small place a few blocks away. You'll find lots of material on whaling here, but we try not to compete with the city's Whaling Museum. Our true focus is on Herman Melville and his writings."

While Martin Faulk and Ellen got caught up on each other's lives, I looked around at the various exhibits. There were first editions of several of Melville's books, plus photographs of him at various stages of his adult life, all with a full beard. There were paintings and photographs of whales, of course, and actual examples of the gear used to hunt them. There were harpoons and whaling pikes and gaffs, long cylinders dating from the early 1800s called California Whaling Rockets that a seaman could fire from his shoulder, and pulleys for lifting dead whales onto the ship. There was even a cat-o'-nine-tails, used for shipboard floggings. I tried to remember one in a Melville novel. *Billy Budd*, first published years after Melville's death, not long after I graduated from college, seemed the most likely, but I was pretty certain the title character had been hanged, not flogged.

"I want you to see the view from our widow's walk," Faulk was saying. "Perhaps if we're lucky we'll see Melville's ghost." He grinned and led the way upstairs.

"I didn't realize you were bringing us on a ghost hunt," Mary Best told Ellen.

"I don't know a thing about it!" Ellen pleaded. "I think he's pulling our leg. He was always something of a jokester in high school."

But we followed him up to the second floor where there was more Melville memorabilia, including a sketch of the author's birthplace in New York City and woodcuts of early whaling ships. There was even a portion of a sail from an actual whaler. "Just one more flight," our guide told us with a smile.

Living in New England for most of my life, I'd observed many widow's walks on the tops of houses, especially those situated near the shore. However, this was my first view from one that actually faced the ocean, with a perfect view of the distant horizon. When we'd all had time to appreciate the view, Faulk pointed in the other direction, toward a more modern house that backed up to his museum. It was more than a hundred feet away, with a semicircular flagstone terrace on the back, facing us. It came out about ten feet from the rear of the house and had a low stone wall around the edge. There were no steps down to the yard, but a door at the corner of the house provided access.

"I tried to buy that property and the nineteenth-century inn

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that was on it," he explained, "because it was where Melville is believed to have stayed the night before he boarded the Acushnet in 1841 for the Pacific whaling waters. But this fellow Ainscott outbid me and built that house two years ago. I can't complain, because he keeps the property in perfect condition. He grows roses all along the terrace wall in the summer. There are those who say Melville's ghost has been seen on the terrace, and it's been hit by lightning during thunderstorms."

"A haunted terrace!" Winston Vance remarked. "Just the thing for you, Sam!"

Martin Faulk turned to me with renewed interest. "Are you a student of the paranormal?"

"Not really. Occasionally in Northmont we've had some crimes of a seemingly impossible nature. I've helped Sheriff Lens get to the bottom of them. But they rarely involve ghosts or the supernatural. The folks in Northmont are more down-to-earth. Perhaps it's your nearness to the sea that brings about these ghostly manifestations."

We went back downstairs while Winston questioned Faulk about the economics of the Melville Museum. "I see you have a nominal admission charge. That hardly seems enough to support the place."

"My father left me a little money when he passed away," Faulk explained, "and I have a backer here in town."

While we were up on the widow's walk admiring the view, some other customers had come in down below. Faulk hurried to greet them and collect the admission fee. I could see that Ellen wanted to remain and chat about the old days, so I suggested that Mary and I stroll around the neighborhood and return in an hour. That was how we came to meet Ken Ainscott.

The museum building was at the top of a hill running almost to the harbor. Mary Best peered at the slope and decided a stroll down the hill would necessarily mean a stroll back up it. "Not in these shoes," she decided. "Let's walk around the other way, Sam."

The wind had come up a little as the early autumn darkness approached, sending gray clouds racing across the sky. We'd walked around to the new house that backed up to the museum before we encountered a middle-aged man coming quickly along the sidewalk. As he passed us, the dim streetlight's glow barely reaching my face, he recoiled slightly and reached up to adjust his glasses. "Gallagher? Is that you?"

"No," I assured him. "Hawthorne's the name."

He seemed to realize his mistake. "Hawthorne! A fine New

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England name. Not related to Nathaniel, are you?"

"Afraid not."

"For a moment I mistook you for someone else." He turned in at the sidewalk of the new house and I realized he must be the owner.

"Mr. Ainscott?" I asked, remembering the name Faulk had mentioned.

He paused and smiled. "Do you know me?"

"No, we're visitors to New Bedford. I'm Dr. Sam Hawthorne and this is my nurse, Mary Best," I said, making the introduction more formal. "An acquaintance was describing your house and its unusual terrace."

Ainscott snorted. "Nothing unusual about it." He studied Mary and me a bit more closely, then added, "I'll show it to you if you like, Dr. Hawthorne."

We followed him up the front steps, waiting while he unlocked the door. With a flip of the switch, the downstairs seemed flooded with light. "I understand this was once the site of a country inn where Herman Melville spent his last night ashore before setting sail on a whaling voyage," I said.

"That's the story, but who knows what really happened a century ago?"

The interior of the house seemed pleasant enough, its dining room windows at the rear looking out onto the flagstone terrace we'd heard about. The furnishings were Early American, and when I noticed a wall of framed pictures facing the terrace windows I assumed they were portraits of Ainscott relatives and family gatherings. It was Mary who went over to inspect them more closely, and I heard her sharp intake of breath. "Is this Hitler?" she asked.

Ainscott came up behind her. "Yes, the Führer himself. I took those when I was in Germany last year. The rally in this picture was attended by one hundred thousand people!"

"What are your feelings about the war?" she asked.

"I think we should stay out of it. What Hitler is doing so far is good for Europe. Believe me, I am not the only one who feels that way."

"Tell me about your terrace," I said, trying to shift to a less controversial topic. "Is it really enchanted? Does Melville's ghost really walk there?"

"I have never seen him. I believe the stories were started by neighborhood children last Halloween. Sometimes they come around on rainy nights and I have to chase them away."

"Someone said the terrace has been struck by lightning."

Ainscott nodded. "At least twice that I've seen, though it didn't

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do any damage." He'd opened the terrace doors while he spoke and we followed him outside. Even in the twilight we could see the fine workmanship of the flagstones and the low wall at their edge.

"Was this done by local workmen?" I asked.

"Fellow named Roddy Gallagher. I thought you were him for a moment outside. Fine workman when he's sober, but there were days when I had to track him down at the bar to get any work out of him."

I smiled. "That's the first time I've been mistaken for a drunken Irishman."

"I meant no offense."

A gust of wind blew some dead leaves from the overhanging trees and Mary shivered slightly. We went back inside. There was no sign of Melville's ghost.

Winston and Ellen Vance had enjoyed a nice visit with Martin Faulk, but they were ready to leave by the time we returned to the Melville Museum. "Good meeting you," Faulk said, shaking my hand. "I wish I could dine with you tonight but I have to see my backer. How long will you be here, Ellen?"

"Just overnight," she told him. "We're on our way to Cape Cod."

He shook his head. "The Cape in October can be a chilly place. You really feel that wind off the ocean. And you know what happened with that hurricane last year. Why not stay here tomorrow instead, and I'll take you all to dinner in the evening."

We exchanged glances, and since the Vances were driving I left the decision to them. "We don't have reservations on the Cape," Ellen said. "Why don't we stay here? We could drive over to the college tomorrow and see the campus. The University of Massachusetts is one of the places our son is interested in."

So it was decided. Ellen promised to phone Faulk the following afternoon and we went off to a seafood restaurant he recommended. Over cocktails I asked, "Is he like you remembered him, Ellen?"

"Pretty much. Of course it's been nearly twenty years since we were in school together. Everyone grows up."

Mary told them about our meeting with Ken Ainscott, about his house and the pictures of Hitler on the wall. "Can you imagine? I feel like I should report him or something!"

"I guess there's no law against having a picture of Hitler on your wall," Winston said. "It's a free country and it's not our war."

It wasn't our war, and even though the following morning's newspaper carried a story about another British ship sunk by U-boats in the North Atlantic, it still seemed a long way away.

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Winston drove us to the college and we spent a few hours roaming the campus, experiencing the same sights and sounds their son might experience in two years' time. If it still wasn't our war.

When we returned to New Bedford in midafternoon the streets were shiny from a recent rain but the day was still fairly warm. It was too early to return to Faulk's place. The museum was open till six and he'd be there at least that long. We decided on a drink at a neighborhood tavern a few blocks away. A tall, slender man with graying hair was entertaining some of the bar patrons with simple card tricks as we entered. Ellen Vance studied his face and movements and suddenly said, "That man looks like you, Sam."

Even though we see our faces in the mirror each day, I don't believe a person can easily spot someone who looks like them. For one thing, appearances have as much to do with gestures and expressions as with the structure of one's face. In a mirror the face is generally at rest, and we rarely see ourselves as others see us. But Ellen's words did focus my attention on the man, and I had to agree there was a passing similarity. I hadn't attempted a card trick since my youth, but I walked over to observe the man with the fleet fingers while the others took seats in a booth.

As he finished a trick involving four aces, I asked, "Your name wouldn't be Gallagher, would it?"

Closer up, he was probably ten years older than me, but perhaps in the twilight it wasn't too surprising that Ainscott had confused us. "Do I know you?" he countered.

"I was visiting Ken Ainscott and I admired his flagstone terrace. He said a local fellow named Roddy Gallagher had done it."

"That's me. I do fireplaces too. Any sort of stonework. Ainscott's was a special job. Did he show you the trick to it?"

"No."

"Here, let me buy you a beer."

"Sorry, I'm with those other people. I really must get back. Just wanted to see if you were Gallagher."

He fanned the deck of cards with one hand and gave a little bow. "That's me!"

I returned to our booth. "He's the man who built Ainscott's enchanted terrace."

Mary's face brightened. "The person Ainscott mistook you for!"

"They do look something alike," Winston agreed.

"Does he know anything about the ghost?" Ellen asked.

"I didn't ask him." But I was remembering his remark about some sort of trick.

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Ellen phoned Faulk from the tavern and he invited us to stop at the museum for a cocktail before we went off to dinner. We went back to the motel to freshen up, and when we arrived at the Melville Museum about seven I noticed a sporty roadster parked outside. "Looks as if the place is still open," I commented.

But the door was locked and Faulk had to come in answer to our knocking. "You're just in time. Come in and meet my backer."

He ushered us into the main display room where a broad-shouldered woman in a flowered dress stood holding a half-empty cocktail glass. "Hello," she said with a smile. "I'm Ann Percy. Martin likes to describe me as his backer, but it's his hard work that is making this museum a success."

She was older than the rest of us, probably in her late forties, and her bright blond hair had obviously been touched up. There was a middle-aged spread about her that I often saw in female patients of her age. "Ann is a professor of American literature at the college," Faulk explained. "She's always been interested in Melville. Despite what she says, this place wouldn't exist without her."

We exchanged some pleasantries while Faulk poured more cocktails. "Will you be joining us for dinner, Miss Percy?" Winston asked.

"Martin already invited me but I'm afraid I can't. I have a meeting with his neighbor, Ken Ainscott. He beat us out on that piece of property, but we're hoping he'll give us an easement for an outdoor fair we want to hold in the spring."

I was still interested in the so-called Melville ghost and the flagstone terrace. "Are you going over there now?"

"Right now."

"I have a quick question for Ainscott if you don't mind me tagging along." I turned to the others. "I'll be back in five minutes."

Ann Percy put down her glass and slipped into a raincoat. "This time of year you never know what the weather's doing."

I'd been wearing mine all afternoon, more for warmth than rain protection, but as we stepped out the door I felt a few drops. "It's starting to drizzle," I called back to the others.

"Damn!" Faulk grumbled. "I'll have to go up and close the windows before we leave for dinner."

The streets were dark, lit only by occasional streetlights that seemed too far apart. "Is this your first visit to New Bedford?" Ann Percy asked between raindrops.

"The first in many years. I came here with my parents once."

The rain was increasing and I wished I'd brought an umbrella

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from the car. But Ken Ainscott's house was not that far and we were ringing his bell before either of us was seriously wet. Ainscott greeted Ann Percy warmly, but he was obviously surprised to see me again. "Hawthorne? I didn't know you were acquainted with Professor Percy."

"We're new friends." I explained. "I just walked over with her to ask you a question about the terrace."

"That again! Still looking for ghosts?" He turned to Ann Percy. "And what's this about an easement?"

"We just need a portion of your backyard for two weeks in the spring. We have some large outdoor exhibits we'd like to display. Of course we'd pay you something for your trouble."

He nodded. "Let me take care of Dr. Hawthorne first and we'll talk about it. Now what's this about my terrace?"

"I happened to run into Roddy Gallagher this afternoon."

"At a bar, I'll bet!"

"Well, yes." I admitted. "He mentioned there was some trick about your terrace. I wondered if—"

"What's that?" Ann Percy asked suddenly. She was pointing toward the dining room windows that looked out on the terrace. A strange greenish light seemed to have appeared for an instant and then vanished. In the distance there was a rumble of thunder.

Ainscott grunted. When the flash of greenish light came again he muttered, "Kids playing tricks. Getting close to Halloween. I'll settle them!"

He picked up a flashlight, hurried to the glass doors, and threw them open, ignoring the rain as he stepped outside. There was a sudden clap of thunder and a flash of lightning from the sky. Ainscott gave a brief scream and then there was darkness. I was right behind him, out the door within seconds, grabbing up the flashlight from where it had fallen on the terrace. I turned it on, scanning the terrace and the surrounding yard.

Ken Ainscott was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is he?" Ann Percy asked.

"I don't know. He was here and then he was gone."

"Was he hit by lightning?"

I ignored the question, walking all along the low stone wall of the terrace, shining the flashlight on the yard below. It was about three feet lower than the terrace itself, maybe six feet below the top of the wall. All along the edge of the yard had been rosebushes, now cut back for winter. The brown soil was wet and unmarked. Ainscott had neither jumped nor been pulled from that

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railing. I turned to shine my light up at the house itself, but the second-story windows were well out of reach. There was no rope, no flagpole for him to have grabbed onto. And no terrace windows except those in the dining room.

"You'd better go get the others," I decided. "I'll phone the police."

"Do you think that's necessary? He might come back. He's only been missing a few minutes."

"He's not coming back," I said, "because there's no place he could have gone."

She hurried down the block to the Melville Museum and returned with Mary, the Vances, and Faulk, all carrying umbrellas against the steady rain. "What is it?" Martin Faulk demanded. "What happened to him?"

"I don't know. The police are on the way. He stepped out on the terrace and disappeared." I told them exactly what had happened, complete with the eerie green light.

Mary and Ellen suggested we search the house, and they set out to do that. Before they returned, a police car with two officers had pulled up. One of them knew Professor Percy and she told them what had happened. "We've been called here before," the officer said. "He claimed he was having trouble with neighborhood kids, but he never had any evidence to show us."

Mary and Ellen came downstairs to report that the house was empty. One of the officers went up to look for himself and the other, the friend of Ann Percy whose name was Jenks, went outside with his flashlight to inspect the terrace. I followed him out and showed him the unmarked dirt of the flower bed that bordered the terrace wall. "He couldn't have jumped down," I said, "even if there'd been time. As it was, there were only seconds. And you can see for yourself there's not another building or even a tree within a hundred feet of here."

Officer Jenks grunted. "I read a mystery story once where a killer lassoed his victim from an upper window of the house and pulled him up there."

"The rest of the house was empty. There's no one upstairs now and no one could have slipped by me to escape, especially not with a body. I've been here since it happened."

"What about Professor Percy?"

"She's been here too, except for going to get the others."

Jenks seemed puzzled. "Why send her out in the rain? Why didn't you phone them?"

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"I guess I never thought of it. The museum is just down at the next corner and I was thinking I'd phone the police while she was gone."

"You heard the talk about ghosts and hauntings out here?"

"I doubt if Herman Melville's ghost had anything to do with Ainscott's disappearance."

Finally, after speaking with the others, Officer Jenks made a few notes on his pad and said, "There's no evidence of a crime here, and none of you are family members. If he doesn't turn up in twenty-four hours, get one of his family to file a missing persons report."

"He has no family," Martin Faulk informed them. "I got to know him pretty well two years ago when I was trying to buy that old inn. He was always a loner, even when he traveled around Europe."

Finally, after the house had been locked up and the police had departed, Winston asked if we were still going to dinner.

"I certainly am!" Faulk said. "I could eat a horse."

We walked back to the museum for the Vances' car. Mary had left her purse in the museum so Faulk and I went in for it while the others waited. "If it's not downstairs, look in the upstairs bathroom," she called after me.

That's where we found it, with Faulk taking the opportunity to turn out a few lights and close some windows against the rain. With the purse restored to her, Mary was as hungry as the rest of us. Faulk took us to a steak and seafood place not far from where we'd eaten the previous night. I was seated facing the bar and immediately had a memory of the previous evening when I'd encountered Roddy Gallagher.

A special job. Did he show you the trick to it?

Yes, Roddy. He showed me the trick to it.

We should have been gone in the morning. We should have been heading back home to Northmont. Instead, Mary and I borrowed the Vances' car and went searching the city of New Bedford for Roddy Gallagher, the man who looked something like me.

We quickly established that he hadn't been home, and his wife seemed to know nothing of his whereabouts. She was a thin, shy woman who answered the door with some hesitation. "He hasn't done anything wrong, has he? You're not police, are you?"

"We're not police," I assured her. "I'm a doctor just visiting the city. I wanted to talk to him about the terrace he built for Mr. Ainscott."

"That was over a year ago."

"I know."

She sighed and brushed a stray hair from her eyes. "Sometimes

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when he's been drinking he stays over with a bartender friend of his. I can give you the address."

"It would be a big help."

Mary and I were both aware that the Vances wanted to be on the road as soon as possible. Still, I didn't feel I could leave Ainscott among the missing, especially with the police showing so little interest in the case. Armed with the bartender's address, I thanked Mrs. Gallagher and we headed across town. When we finally located Roddy he was having a late breakfast at his friend's apartment.

"I know you," he said when he saw me. "But where from?"

"Yesterday in the bar. You were doing card tricks."

He smiled, remembering it. "So I was! You asked about the stonework I did for Ken Ainscott."

I nodded. "Ainscott has disappeared. We're trying to find him."

"Can't help you there. Haven't seen him lately." His eyes strayed to Mary Best. "This your wife?"

I felt my face flush. "She's my nurse. I'm a doctor visiting the city."

"We fear Ainscott may have come to some harm," Mary told him. "Does he have any enemies?"

"I don't know him that well."

"But you built that terrace," I said, "and you mentioned there was a trick to it."

"Well, a trick to the construction."

"We need to see what it is."

"Sure, I'll show you. He's pretty proud of it."

"Let's go. We'll drive you over and bring you back."

We arrived at the Ainscott house around eleven o'clock. I'd left the front door unlocked the night before, and it was still unlocked. Apparently Ainscott hadn't returned. I led the way through the dining room and out onto the terrace. The sun was just beginning to appear after the rain, sucking the moisture from the damp flagstones in little wisps of mist.

"It's still one of the best jobs I ever did," Gallagher said, marveling at his own craftsmanship.

"Show us the trick."

"Sure."

He walked over to the center of the terrace, at the point where the low semicircular wall was farthest from the house, and lifted his right foot to push against the top of the wall. It started to move, and as Mary and I watched, the stones gave a slight grinding sound and pivoted down until the top came to rest in the rose

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garden. "You see? It forms a couple of steps so you can reach the yard without going back inside and out the other door. It was Ainscott's idea but I worked out the mechanics of it. After you step off, the balance causes it to rise up and close by itself. You can pull it down from the garden side too."

The demonstration, interesting as it was, disappointed me. There was nothing in this so-called trick to explain Ainscott's disappearance the previous night. I could see even now that the lowered steps had left an indentation in the soft garden earth that hadn't been there before. And Ainscott would have had no time to use the steps in the few seconds before I followed him outside.

"This is it?" I asked. "There's no built-in hiding place or anything like that?"

"Why should there be a hiding place? I built him a terrace with hidden steps to the garden and yard. Isn't that good enough?"

"It's very clever," Mary complimented him. "Sam and I will drive you back home now."

After we dropped him off, not at home but at his friend's bar, I headed back to the motel where Ellen and Winston were waiting for us. "I hate to admit I'm baffled," I told Mary. "Ainscott pulled off that stunt right before my eyes and I don't know how he did it."

"You think he's alive?"

"I'm beginning to think he must be. Imagining him dead is even more impossible."

Winston and Ellen were sympathetic but could offer little help. I sat in their room, ready to check out but not quite able to leave this business behind me. "What about that Percy woman?" Ellen asked. "She was with you at his house. Could she have done something?"

"I don't see how. Or why. Apparently her dealings with him had been friendly enough. But you people were with Faulk. Did he indicate any troubles with his neighbor?"

Winston Vance shook his head. "I don't remember him saying anything. After you and Professor Percy left he just went upstairs to close the windows and then poured us some drinks."

Finally Mary got me moving. "You can't sit here all day, Sam. It's time to go. Ainscott is probably alive and well, having a good laugh. It might be just some magic trick that Gallagher fellow taught him."

We checked out of the motel and climbed back into Winston and Ellen's car for the return trip. As we were passing the Melville Museum I glanced up at the widow's walk at the top and suddenly I knew what had happened to Ken Ainscott.

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"Stop the car," I said. "We haven't bid goodbye to your friend Martin."

He saw us coming and somehow he must have known the purpose of our visit. "We're closed for a while, or I'd invite you in," he told me at the door. "I'm busy rearranging some exhibits."

"We just wanted to say goodbye again, Martin," Ellen told him.

He tried to relax and be gracious. "Of course. Come in, but just for a minute. This is a busy day for me."

I wasted no time coming to the point. "I'd like to take another look at your widow's walk before we go."

"That's impossible. I'm doing some work up there right now."

"I'm afraid I'll have to insist. Otherwise the police will be called."

Martin Faulk smiled slightly. "I see. Of course. Follow me."

I turned to the others. "Stay down here."

"You're not going up without me," Mary insisted, trailing along.

"Keep back, then."

On the second floor Faulk paused to pick up a tube about six feet long with a barbed tip projecting from it and a coil of stout rope hanging down. We'd seen it on our first visit. I was on him in an instant, pushing him off balance as we wrestled over the device. I ended up on top.

"What is it, Sam?" Mary called from behind me.

"Just what I feared. The California Whaling Rocket we saw on display when we first came here. Will you show us Ainscott's body now, Martin, or do we need to search the place?"

"You have to realize why I did it," he pleaded as Ellen and Winston came up the stairs to join us.

But there was no fight left in him. He took us to the attic stairway and showed us the body of Ken Ainscott wrapped in sailcloth, a gaping wound in his chest. Ellen Vance simply stared at Faulk, unbelieving, unable to focus on the body before her.

"I remembered he said he was going to close the upstairs windows when the rain started," I told them. "And you confirmed that he went up to do just that. But when we came back here later last night he was closing the windows then. When I remembered that, I wondered what he had done earlier. We'd seen the California Whaling Rocket, of course, along with the pulleys for lifting dead whales onto a ship. The rocket was actually a rocket-powered harpoon, easily capable of covering the hundred feet between this house and Ainscott's terrace."

Vance stared at his wife's old friend. "You're telling me Faulk har-

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pooned him and hauled him up to the widow's walk on this roof?"

"Exactly. When I thought back to that flash of lightning I'd seen just as Ainscott vanished, I realized the crack I took for thunder came a split second before the flash, contrary to the laws of nature. It wasn't lightning and thunder at all, but the firing of the rocket and its streaking trail from the widow's walk down to the terrace. The eerie green light was simply a flashlight shining through green cellophane to attract Ainscott's attention and lure him onto the terrace. And the previous lightning strikes Ainscott reported were Faulk's testing of the rocket harpoon to see if it would carry that far. He had the end of the rope attached to the pulley for raising dead whales, and he contrived it to yank Ainscott's body into the air as soon as the harpoon struck him. Any traces of blood were washed away by the rain. When I got out there, seconds later, the body was up on the widow's walk, invisible in the darkness and rain. He needed a rainy night, of course, so the rocket's trail would be mistaken for lightning."

Ellen was shaking her head, still trying to comprehend. "But why, Martin? I thought you were getting along well with him. You couldn't still be angry because he outbid you for that old inn."

"It wasn't the inn, Ellen. Don't you understand? The man was a Nazi! His whole attitude, the pictures on his walls! He admired Adolf Hitler, and here we are almost at war with Germany. I had to do something. If war broke out, who knows what damage the man might have done? I tested the rocket harpoon a couple of times and it seemed to work well. Then you came, Ellen, and you even mentioned your son who'd be off to college if war didn't break out. I thought of him and all our country's other sons, and knew I had to go through with my plan. I wished it was Hitler himself down there. It was only Ken Ainscott, but that was a beginning."

Vance said, very quietly, "We'll have to tell the police, Martin."

"I was going to bury his body in the basement. No one would ever have found it there."

Once, a year or so later, I thought of Martin Faulk and asked Ellen if a trial had ever been held. She told me he'd been ruled insane and sent to an institution. By that time the Battle of Britain was under way and the first peacetime draft had been approved. The entire world seemed to be drifting toward insanity.

Remembering that view from the widow's walk, I wondered if Martin Faulk might have looked down on Ainscott's terrace far below and seen Hitler there, and imagined himself to be like God, hurling not a harpoon but a thunderbolt.●

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HOLIDAY PATROL

by Janwillem van de Wetering

"I thought the inner-city rape was being taken care of," the police dispatcher said on the radio. "Constables Ketchup and Karate were going out there in their bus, but they don't report back and now I can't raise them. Anyone mind taking over?"

De Gier grabbed his microphone. "Detective Patrol 6-14 here. Our position is Emperor Canal, corner Deer Alley. What's up, Dispatcher?"

"Tourist Female," Dispatcher said, "speaking some kind of German, charges a Tourist Male with abusing her. Tourist Female escaped from Tourist Male's rented holiday apartment. She is in the street now. Tourist Female claims Tourist Male has a gun." She laughed. "A cannon."

The radio voice was female—a warm voice, melodious, with lilting tones slipping into affectionate innuendos. Detective-Sergeant de Gier of the Amsterdam Municipal Police, on surveillance duty, behind the wheel of an unmarked vehicle commanded by Detective-Adjutant Grijpstra, groaned his appreciation. He even, while the dispatcher's vocal femininity filled the small car, closed his eyes for a moment.

"Hey!" Grijpstra shouted.

De Gier woke from his trance. Their white unmarked Fiat Panda narrowly missed driving into Emperor Canal.

"I knew that dispatcher's voice would be causing trouble." Grijpstra took the microphone from the sergeant as the Fiat veered back from the canal's edge.

Born in Rotterdam, Holland, Janwillem van de Wetering did his national service as a policeman. Perhaps that explains why his cops are usually portrayed as sensitive, concerned public servants, unlike the police in so many other contemporary crime stories. He continues to return to his homeland as a setting for his fiction, although he has lived in the U.S. since 1975. ¶

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Earlier on that evening Grijpstra had commented on the dispatcher's voice.

"All that lovey-doveyness gets in the way. I bet you there's nothing to back it up either." Grijpstra cleared his throat furiously. "Just like in that late-night nude show on AIR, your favorite station, Sergeant."

"Amsterdam Illegal Radio?" de Gier asked. "That wonderful lead voice talking about what she does in Art Deco bedrooms, in elegant Old South?"

Adjutant Grijpstra's forefinger prodded Sergeant de Gier's biceps. "You know I checked that radio show out? That I located a bunch of derelicts using secondhand equipment in a drafty loft in Mad Nun Alley? That I threatened to shut their operation down? That I didn't because the outfit is pathetic? You want to know why? Are you ready to accept that your nude show's star performer, she with the naughty/little-girlie/come-check-what-I-saved-for-you/Lorelei voice is a lumpy fifty-year-old with fogged-up glasses?"

"Mature and sexy," de Gier said. "So?"

Grijpstra grunted furiously. "The voice may be sexy; the reality is pure *dog.*"

"I like pure dog." De Gier smiled happily. "And I am adult enough to appreciate older women."

They drove in silence for two blocks.

"You should read *Police Weekly.*" The sergeant kneaded Grijpstra's shoulder. "Last week's issue had an article on 'What the Adult Male Looks for in His Search for a Partner.' "

"Bah," Grijpstra said.

"Bah what?" De Gier smiled. "You're still stuck in firm flesh? The prime sexual desire, Adjutant, in the mature male, isn't for physical penetration of a junior madonna-esque body. In the older male, interest in spiritual aspects appears clearly. It's love and affection men like you and me are after. It's the safe feeling we cherish, it's mutual caring we are in want of . . ." De Gier's smile widened. ". . . it's the ability to caress the beloved's feet with our own before falling asleep that we crave. The arm around her shoulder. Leaning our tired head against her bosom afterward."

The idea seemed to surprise Grijpstra. "You mean cuddling, Sergeant?"

"Hello?" the cuddly radio voice now asked while it filled the Fiat with

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loving-care vibrations. "Are you there, 6-14? I know you're Special Assignments only, but the uniform patrol has let me down here."

"Location of alleged victim?" Grijpstra asked, while nudging de Gier, who, listening to the dispatcher, was about to swoon again.

Grijpstra switched off the microphone. "Try to keep the car away from our open sewers." He switched the microphone on again.

"Location of incident? Dispatcher? Hello?"

"Just a minute," the dispatcher said. "It's in my databank, but the computer malfunctions."

"Open sewers?" de Gier asked while waiting. "You heard about the eighteen-centimeter-long minnow caught in Straight Tree Ditch? Did you see the photo of boys diving into the Amstel?"

"Prince Canal," the radio voice said. "Corner Brewer Canal. Please let me know what happens. New police policy wants us dispatchers not merely to direct but to support all colleagues on patrol. I can't help you with finding cell space but I can connect you with NASSAD." There was the ticking of a keyboard. "Just a moment, let me check this . . . I don't think NASSAD is open on weekends. It *is* Saturday, am I right?"

"That's affirmative," Grijpstra said. "What's NASSAD again?"

"New Age Shamanic Society Against Denial employs psychologists to diffuse ego assertion."

"Right," Grijpstra said gruffly. "Sergeant! Let's go. Corner Prince and Brewer."

De Gier had the Fiat Panda going already. Crimes under the Rape & Attempted Murder heading are defined as serious crime and warrant use of flashing blue lights and siren. Police rules prescribe that excessive speeds may be used and traffic signals may be ignored with caution.

The sergeant's long arm reached through the window and stuck a magnetized blue light on the car's roof. The light flashed. The Fiat's hidden two-toned horn was on. De Gier sang along with the TEEH-TOOH TEEH-TAH TEEH-TOOH of the siren. He held a black belt in Assorted Unarmed Combat and habitually won contests in the police shooting gallery. Perhaps this would be an occasion for testing his skills.

Grijpstra clicked on his safety belt. The pistol's butt caressing his armpit heightened the adjutant's physical awareness. He restrained the grin that he could feel twisting his cheeks as he tried not to enjoy de Gier's reckless driving. Did he really want to wrestle a murderous rapist on Brewer Bridge? Was he looking forward to shoving a shackled psychopath into a dank cell?

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Not that there were any cells, dank or dry, available these days.

In spite of a marked increase in crime and street warfare, official Amsterdam police policy was unchanged. The capital's chief constable kept urging his subordinates to maintain a low profile. All personnel were requested to make as few arrests as possible. Even so, since drug abuse was affecting unstable citizens' behavior, Amsterdam's limited jail space was in much demand.

Saturday, 2 A.M.—the speeding Fiat careered through empty alleys and quaysides. A flock of starlings twittered, lifted itself from a tree, panicked, fluttered down in front of the windshield. When de Gier could see again, a lone drunk loomed up. The drunk pushed a bicycle, stolen a minute ago. He released his loot. The bicycle carried on alone until it splashed into the canal. The bereaved thief watched his sinking loot be replaced by growing circles reaching out toward the canal's far shore.

Rats, disturbed by the siren's wailing, squeaked angrily while scurrying for cover between elm roots.

Another drunk, a man with a white beard, climbed a lamppost as the Fiat approached. The man's fear changed to cheer. He fell off the post when he lifted his hat to wave.

A few late prostitutes and drug dealers faded into their respective doorways.

The car turned east at Brewer Canal. A woman in a shimmering low-cut black gown, silhouetted against the black wall of a houseboat, performed exaggerated dance steps on Brewer Bridge. Grijpstra noticed the dancer's hat, which was shaped like a silken butterfly, with large, drooping orange wings. The Fiat was skidding.

"Hey!" Grijpstra shouted.

Tires complained as the car turned around briskly. "We just passed our location," de Gier said. "Corner of Prince and Brewer canals. I see no other female complainants about. That's her, Adjutant."

The detectives wished the dancing lady a good evening, then stood back.

"I dance," the woman said in accented German, "because I am nervous."

The month was July—holiday season, and most Amsterdamers had vacated the city. After enquiring ahead for the latest news on civil wars, contagious diseases, raging bushfires, lethal mudslides, currency-value changes, availability of wildlife, and discounts on amenities, the citizens were gone. Quite a few had managed to rent their apartments to tourists. The city had filled up with for-

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eign guests, served by Turkish waiters, Moroccan maids, Russian topless dancers, Filipino prostitutes.

Most Amsterdam police personnel were on holiday too, except the multilingual, kept back to protect tourists. Multilinguals would enjoy extra holiday time later. Grijpstra spoke some English.

De Gier, who liked reading, could make his way in German, Spanish, and French. The sergeant's English was acceptably fluent.

"Listen up," the woman said, gently gyrating her body to prepare for her next impressive stand. "My rapist unfortunately carries cannon." She pointed at a gable house on Brewer Canal. "Up above, he sleepink, he drinkink, and he wants to devastate me with cannon. I dance and flee."

Grijpstra bent down. His twitching nostrils noticed no fragrance of cannabis products. He checked the woman's pupils but did not notice dilation. Her long, stylish dress was clean. The high-heeled shoes looked new. The butterfly hat was pinned down neatly to long, thick, cared-for hair.

"You sniffler?" the woman asked in German.

De Gier interpreted.

Grijpstra looked abashed.

His discomfort pleased the woman. "Good. You good policeman, yes?" She breathed up into his face. "I not drunken. Mister Englishman, he drunken. He drinkink Dutch alcohol-hootch. From refrigerator." She extended a leg, danced away, turned, danced back. Complainant was possibly a little crazed, Grijpstra concluded. Nothing serious perhaps. Her lover got drunk. There was an argument. Now Lover was asleep in the slender silver-gray gable house she had indicated. Maybe his charming sergeant could talk this nice lady into rejoining her Herr Englander and he and de Gier could tiptoe out of this case.

"What do you think?" Grijpstra asked his sergeant. It was maybe time to go eat something. Colleagues had told him about a new all-night deli in Vijzel Street. Calf-ragout croquettes, shrimp rolls, and the house brand of Gouda cheese were recommended—now, if de Gier could take care of this complaint in a tactful and speedy manner . . .

To bolster his optimism, Grijpstra remembered last night's case, which had also involved foreigners.

Driving about town, he and De Gier had been called to Leyden Square police station where a Japanese man had showed up in

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distress, demanding that the desk sergeant perform an urgent, so far incomprehensible, action.

"*Moshi moshi!*" the Japanese complainant kept wailing.

"Just one doggone minute here, sir," the desk sergeant had said, picking up his phone to call the radio office.

The dispatcher put out a general call. "Anyone speak Japanese?"

The 6-14 responded. "My sergeant speaks Japanese."

"Hey!" de Gier protested. "What are you getting us into? Nobody speaks Japanese. It's an impossible language."

"Japanese speak it, don't they?" Grijpstra asked. "You spent time in Kyoto, didn't you? You had girlfriends and all. You must remember some of the lingo."

Complainant turned out to be an older well-dressed male who was very upset.

"I thought Japanese were Buddhists," Leyden Square police station's desk sergeant said. The desk sergeant had attended a Police Academy evening class: "Behavior and Attitudes of Asian Tourists." "Aren't Buddhists supposed to cultivate a relaxed attitude? Don't Buddhists know how to step back from what appears to be the general beep-up?" The desk sergeant's grimace showed disappointment. "Just look at Moshi Moshi-san here. Can't we get him to calm down?"

"*Moshi moshi!*" the Japanese cried.

"Means 'hello,' " de Gier said. "He's trying to make contact."

Grijpstra had calmed complainant by putting a protective arm around the gentleman's frail shoulders, guiding him to a chair, setting him down, addressing the Japanese in a sympathetic low rumble. "There there there," Grijpstra said in Dutch, "you're safe, my dear sir. You've come to the right place." He patted complainant's shoulder. "Just tell my colleague here what you want us to do." He lowered his voice to a confidential level. "Feel free to speaky your own speaky, sir."

De Gier bowed. "In Japanese, dear sir. In Nihongo. Nihongo okay. Japanese language altogether *yoroshii desu.*"

The Japanese was still distressed. *"Watashi no okusan wa. Doko desu ka? Huh?"*

"Your wife?" de Gier translated. "Lost her way?"

The Japanese tried to pantomime what had happened. He made circular movements and imitated the sound of a train. He bent forward as if peering into a window. He tried to explain what he saw.

"You were looking at toy trains," de Gier said. "That would be at the Beehive Department Store? I've seen the new electrical mod-

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els in their toy window on Dam Street. You were admiring the product, right? With *Okusan*? With your wife?"

"So desu." The Japanese gentleman's effort to get through to "outside people" made his eyes bulge and his nostrils flare. *"So desu ne. Nah?"*

De Gier translated so that Grijpstra and the desk sergeant could follow the conversation. "Means 'That's right, isn't it?'"

"I am right?" De Gier asked the Japanese cheerfully. "Good for us, mister tourist. Turistu-san. Then what happened?"

The Japanese opened his mouth wide. He inhaled. He exhaled, closing his eyes, stretching his arms. *"Okusan wa."*

"Yawning, was she? Your wife got bored? Because you kept watching those ever-returning goddamn toy trains?"

"Goddammu." The Japanese's mood improved. *"Ha! So desu ne. Nah?"*

His mime continued. He was looking into the store window again, where the little trains entered and exited, forever passing little buildings set in a plastic landscape.

"As you kept watching goddammu trains," De Gier asked, "your wife, *okusan*, went *pfffftttt?"*

"Sooo desu, ne? Nah!" Complainant relived the awful moment. The Japanese tourist's features now showed sudden insight into a serious situation. His gestures projected horrified sensations of bewilderment, of feeling lost and alone forever. Here, his gesticulating limbs and feverishly working features told the sergeant, was the last intelligent being surrounded by the void of a meaningless universe.

Turistu-san flapped his hands. He wailed.

"Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear." The desk sergeant sympathized with the agony of another conscious being.

The desk sergeant addressed Grijpstra. "Such a neat-looking gent too. Can't Buddhism help out? Weren't you taking that class too, Adjutant? What was that shit about koans the professor kept raving about? Illogical riddles that break the bubble? How about 'The Sound of One Hand'?"

The desk sergeant held up his right hand. "Sir? You get this?"

The Japanese looked unhappy.

"You stay right here. Not to worry." De Gier bowed. *"Shimpai ga nai yo.* Not to worry now. *Tomodachi?* Friends?" He pointed at his colleagues. *"Tomodachi* here. They take care of you. Friends. Okay?" He caressed the old gentleman's cheek. "I'll be back in just one minute."

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The desk sergeant had a constable serve coffee and butter cookies. Grijpstra sat next to the tourist.

"Your *okusan* will be just fine," Grijpstra reassured the Japanese gentleman.

"That's what you get when you depend on a woman," the desk sergeant said. "Get yourself a wife and she gets herself lost and causes pain. Trick is to avoid pain in the first place. Not have a wife. Take me now. I live with a bunch of red-beak finches. All look the same. Easy to replace, you know? I keep them in a big cage, feed them well, and they hoot their little thank-yous. All got them cute little hooters, you know." The sergeant squeezed his nose shut with thumb and finger. "Thank you. *Peh-PEH!*"

The Japanese looked up. *"Soooo desu, ne? Nah!"*

"Peh PEH?" Grijpstra asked.

De Gier, having made use of the Fiat's siren and flashing blue light, was back within twenty minutes. His assumption had been right. The lost wife, upper class, aristocratic, an intelligent lady, knew enough not to start wandering through the inner city's alleys. She had gone back to the Beehive Department Store, where she was waiting with her back to the toy train showcase window.

De Gier wished her good evening. *"Komban wa."*

She returned the greeting haughtily.

De Gier smiled. He showed his police shield. He pointed at the blue light flashing above his car. He escorted *Okusan* to the passenger side. He stood at attention while she daintily folded her small shape into the Fiat.

Okusan spoke some English. "Police-san?"

"Hai hai," De Gier said. "Yes, ma'am."

"My husband . . ." she paused—she took a deep breath—she exhaled sharply, "like all men, is *i-di-ot.*"

De Gier agreed. *"So desu ne? Nah!"*

"Police-san? Men are stu-pid."

De Gier bowed his head deeply. *"So desu ne? Nah!"* His affirmative response didn't defuse *Okusan's* anger. *Okusan* screamed in fury when she saw her husband, who yelled back in defense.

The desk sergeant stepped between the warring couple. "None of that in my station, folks."

"Now, now, now," Grijpstra said. "It can't be that bad."

"VERY BAD!" husband and wife screamed back at him.

Adjutant Grijpstra wouldn't let the couple call for a taxi until they resolved their problem. The adjutant explained, using de Gier as his translator and his own acting as illustration, that it is

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the task of the Amsterdam Municipal Police to protect its clients from themselves. Extreme stress during a holiday, the adjutant ventured to make clear, in a mindscape where normal defenses are absent, can lead to lasting trouble in a relationship. He wouldn't want these nice folks to initiate trouble that might travel back to Japan with them, not in Amsterdam, the magic city.

"Kiss and dance," the adjutant ordered.

The Japanese couple did not wish to understand.

It was de Gier's turn. He said that holidays are fun. Holidays aren't designed to split up happy and harmonious couples.

"Kiss and dance?" *Okusan* asked sternly. *"Wakarimasen.* No understanding. Please. Show me?"

Grijpstra and de Gier danced and hugged.

"No kissing?" *Okusan* asked.

"Not in my station," the desk sergeant said.

The Japanese woman resisted, but Grijpstra and de Gier urged, her husband bowed, and the uniformed desk sergeant kept saluting. She finally had to laugh.

The Japanese couple danced and kissed before going back to the Hilton in a taxi. They bowed. "Thank you, *arigatoo*, goodbye, *sayonara."*

Miss Tango's case might turn out okay too, Grijpstra was hoping. Not to worry. He asked complainant for her name.

"Eira-Liisa."

"Take over, Sergeant," Grijpstra ordered.

De Gier interrogated complainant. Grijpstra, watching the woman, noted details to be mentioned in a report that might not have to be written. Grijpstra noted that complainant was an elegant forty-year-old, five foot eight inches, with a lithe body, weighing some 150 pounds. Eira-Liisa's hair was a natural white-blond. Her face was triangular. Grijpstra noted some wrinkling in the skin. Her eyes were large and blue, slightly slanted.

"Eira-Liisa?" de Gier asked meanwhile. "What happened?"

The woman had begun her slow dance movements again. "He abusink me." Her voice became anxious. "I have AIDS now maybe?"

"No precautions?"

She looked embarrassed. "He no precautions. I yes. Woman alone. Always protection," she insisted. "I have been abusinked. Abused. He, Mister Englishman, points cannon." She made a fluid move, sweeping up arm and hand.

"Weapon?" De Gier asked.

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"Phallus?" Grijpstra asked.
"Both," Eira-Liisa said.
"What pointed first?"
She looked away.
"Eira-Liisa?" de Gier asked pleasantly. "Please?"
She looked away. "First the phallic."
"You and your Mister Englishman, you share lodgings?" de Gier asked.
But it wasn't that simple. Few things are. In her excitement, the woman was using another language now, more foreign than German, confounding even the linguistic sergeant.
"What? Please?" de Gier asked.
A police siren, approaching rapidly, complicated things further. A minibus raced down Brewer Canal's southern quayside, squealed its brakes, slid toward the Fiat Panda. Two uniformed constables tumbled out of the dented and blood-bespattered Volkswagen. Both men were small-sized, both had their right hands close to their fast-draw holsters.
The two little constables took turns in delivering clipped sentences, both shouting to fully impact their statements.
"Hello!" Karate yelled.
"What's up?" Ketchup yelled.
"There was a bar fight on the way that we couldn't pass up."
"We lost some time beating on Liberian sailors."
"Kicking them into Realen Canal."
"Hahahaha." They both laughed.
"Sorry, Adjutant."
"Sorry, Sergeant."
"We came as soon as we could, though," Ketchup said.
"Here we are."
"At your orders."
Both men stood to attention, saluted, stood at rest.
"Hello, Ketchup," Grijpstra said.
"Hello, Karate," de Gier said.
"Finnish," the woman was saying. "I am Finnish. I rented apartment here. I came to listen to Bach cantatas, in the Saint Nicholas church. Mister Englishman has own apartment too. Not together. Yes, same house."
"Mister Englishman has name?" De Gier asked.
"Mister Englishman is Michael."
"How come you know his name?"
"First we dance together." She slid into another long step,

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humming a tango tune. "In hallway?"

"Adjutant?" Karate asked. "We got that radio call correctly? This lady says she was raped? A gun was used to threaten? There is an armed perpetrator in a house nearby?" Both constables smiled eagerly. "Can we get him for you? He'll be a drug dealer, right? We'll get stash and cash while you interrogate . . ."

"Hahahaha," Ketchup said.

Karate laughed too. ". . . this attractive addict in the privacy of her own apartment."

"He threatens me with cannon," the woman said. She indicated the weapon's size by keeping her hands half a meter apart. She pointed at her head. "Cannon points at my head."

"Some kind of Uzi," Grijpstra said.

"We'll get the weapon," Ketchup said.

"We could get in through the roof," Karate said.

"Or climb the gable."

"Can we do that, Adjutant?"

"We'll all go together and use the stairs," Grijpstra said.

Eira-Liisa used her key to open the gable house's front door.

The party walked up a narrow and steep staircase—de Gier first, complainant next. All policemen held their guns ready. De Gier looked pensive. He visualized a crazed British killer waiting for them upstairs, perhaps akin to another killer he had recently chased, a London-based bank robber who, resisting arrest, had shot an Amsterdam constable after a runabout on rooftops.

De Gier shushed Ketchup and Karate, who were chuckling again. Grijpstra plodded behind.

"I go first, yes?" Eira-Liisa asked.

De Gier stepped aside, then tiptoed ahead again, aiming his pistol well above the woman's right shoulder.

"You're the champion," Ketchup whispered. "Aim for the head, Sarge."

"Sarge?" Karate whispered. "Fire the warning shot last."

"Shoot the gun out of his hand, Sergeant," Grijpstra growled.

"Abusink me," Eira-Liisa, Finnish woman, whispered. She gently stretched a leg, then slid toward the bed.

Grijpstra found a wall switch. Lights glared down from the ceiling. The Englishman's body, wrapped in sheets, didn't move. A snore changed into a rattle that gurgled away slowly. Then the body snored again. Karate and Ketchup arranged themselves at opposite sides of the bed, their pistols pointed at the body.

Grijpstra and de Gier put away their weapons.

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The company found themselves in a small apartment's bed/sitting room. "Mister Englishman rents from agency," the woman whispered. "I also renting. My apartment on other side. We often meetink, in hallway, yes?"

Ketchup and Karate chanted obscenities under their breath. Grijpstra growled at them. De Gier smiled at Eira-Liisa. "Go on. Please?"

"Nothink like that," the woman hissed at Ketchup and Karate. "Just meetink in hallway. Yes?" She shook Ketchup's shoulder. "You. Stupids. You speak Finnish perhaps? No? I writink poetry in Finnish. Published poetry. By publisher. You maybe can write poetry? No? Not even in Hungarian? Estonian? No? Not even in simple Komi dialect? In Karelian? In Ludic? I write poetry in everythink."

Grijpstra pushed Karate. "Say you're sorry."

Karate mumbled.

"Let me hear it, Constable."

"Sorry, ma'am," Karate said clearly.

The woman pushed Ketchup. "You."

Ketchup apologized loudly.

"Better." She smiled at de Gier. "Mister Michael and me meetink on staircase. He sayink: 'I don't dare talk to you, you always quiet. I curious what you thinkink.' "

De Gier nodded attentively.

"I sayink: 'Why you not ask?' " Eira-Liisa said.

"He sayink: 'No, then I would know what you thinkink. No fun. The mystery would be endink.' I sayink: 'Maybe the mystery's beginnink?' "

De Gier raised an eyebrow. "You were encouraging this Mister Michael?"

Eira-Liisa laughed sadly, shaking her head. "Stupid, yes? Beginnink of what? Beginnink of end? He askink me to eat. We eatink in cafe. I returnink with him here. He drinkink, drinkink. I dancink."

The policemen studied the shape of the accused, still asleep, head hidden in rumpled sheets.

"Hello?" De Gier asked loudly.

A head appeared, with one bloodshot eye staring under tousled hair. "Never mind," the mouth said quickly, "I am dreaming. Must be that jenever I drank." The head disappeared. Lips smacked while the body, safely tucked away into its dark void, rearranged itself for maximum comfort. "Neo-Nazis," the voice mumbled. "Next episode in the nightmare."

The Englishman snored.

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"HELLO?" De Gier bellowed.

"Cannon," the lady said. "In bed maybe. You look for cannon. Yes? So he not shootink."

"Yank the blanket?" Karate asked.

De Gier nodded.

The constables' guns now aimed at a naked Englishman.

"Sir?" De Gier asked, showing his identification. "Police. Could we have your gun, please?"

The Englishman covered his crotch with his hands while he awkwardly tried to sit up. "Gun?" He sounded puzzled.

"Cannon," the woman said. "You threaten. I call cops. You now give them cannon?"

"Oh, for bleep's sake," the Englishman said. He smiled. "This is a dream, right?"

De Gier spoke softly but clearly. "It's a serious charge, sir. Apparently you raped this woman and then threatened her life by pointing a large gun at her. If we could have that gun, sir?"

The Englishman looked at the woman. "Eira-Liisa, we only danced."

"Only?" she asked.

"We would like to have the weapon," Grijpstra said. "Where did you put the gun, sir?"

"For that same bleep's sake," Michael said. "We danced the tango. She told me Finnish women do that. Because they're shy or something. Doing the tango is their pre-mating ritual."

He sang the tune, waving one hand while screening his genitals with the other. "Ta *TA* ta-taahh, teeteeteeteeTAAAAH-ta-TA-tata . . . "

"That's right," Karate said. "I saw that on TV. Tango is big in Finland. Happens in cafes. They got tango on the jukebox. Women come on to you. You don't talk but can touch while dancing. Kind of intimate. Saves flirting. Next move is 'Your place or mine?' "

"His place," Eira-Liisa said. "Here, then comink the cannon."

"Your gun, sir?" Grijpstra asked.

"Oh, *that* gun," the Englishman said. "But that was an antique. Came with the apartment here. Part of the furniture. I was just showing it to her. What *did* I do with the damn thing? Will you get out of my dream when I find it?"

"Please?" de Gier asked.

The Englishman jumped up and rushed around the room, pushing his way past the policemen, stumbling about wildly. A plate loaded with potato chips got brushed off a cabinet. Magazines and

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videotapes flew about. A laptop computer got picked up and shaken. Suspect overturned a suitcase and kicked its contents. He looked through drawers. He pushed books off shelves. "There," he shouted. "There is your damn cannon!" He threw a large object on the bed.

Grijpstra picked up the bulky weapon gingerly.

"It's ornamental," Michael said. "Ancient. Antique. A front loader. They used them in the old days with ball and powder. I found it behind the books. I am sorry. Okay? I shouldn't have been nosy."

Grijpstra showed the weapon to de Gier. "What do you think, Sergeant?"

"Known as a blunderbuss," de Gier said. "Front loader. A cavalry weapon. Early Napoleonic. I would say. Eighteenth century, flint-and-steel, one of the first handguns equipped with a trigger."

"Illegal?"

De Gier shook his head. "Collector's piece, Adjutant."

Michael walked over and picked up the pistol. He waved it about. "It must belong to whoever lives here. I rented the apartment furnished. I'm a scholar, you see. A historian and sociologist, researching the last war. I was telling Eira-Liisa here. My specialty is the British-Dutch sea wars. Weapons fascinate me."

"My specialty is Van Gogh Museum," the woman said. "Other specialty is Bach cantata. This Sunday concert. In Saint Nicholas Cathedral. I plan goink listen."

Ketchup held up a hand. "Didn't we have a rape charge?"

"Rrrrape," Eira-Liisa said, rolling her R, staring at Michael.

"Tango," Michael said. "You explained it to me. You even got the tape from your apartment across the landing. First dance, then . . ."

Ketchup and Karate sang obscenities, softly.

"Hey," Grijpstra growled. "Constables. You were warned before."

Eira-Liisa sobbed. "Now I AIDS."

"No," Michael shook his head. "None of that, dear. I'm clean. I had my nose straightened early on this summer, an accident broke it, the break interfered with my breathing. They checked my blood prior to operating. No sickness. I'm just fine."

"Ladies of the night," Eira-Liisa sobbed. "Amsterdam full of them."

"I wouldn't dare go to the whores," Michael said. "You're the first since my nose got straightened." He smiled. "I really liked it."

"Me no nightlady." She stamped her foot. "Arrest him, please!"

"But you got drunk," Grijpstra said, "and then you waved that gun about, sir."

"It isn't just the Finnish who are shy, you know," Michael said. "They tango, we drink alcohol. I don't drink usually, all right? The

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agency said I was welcome to use the apartment's supply of food and drink. I found this damned jar. I can handle a few beers, but this jenever is liquid dynamite. This is Amsterdam, foreign to me. The local language sounds like the people aren't feeling well. Beautiful women dance in the vestibule. All this makes me nervous." He opened the refrigerator. "I looked for a beer. Found this." He held up a stone jug. "Looks harmless, doesn't it?"

The Englishman, reliving his adventure, was pulling his hair.

"You got all that?" Grijpstra asked de Gier.

"Yes, Adjutant." He turned to Suspect. "Then what happened, sir?"

"Well, I got drunk. Right? I was telling her that I know things, about antique weapons, for instance, because I'm a historian." The Englishman pointed the blunderbuss at a window. "This thing doesn't even fire. See?"

Suspect pulled the weapon's trigger.

The explosion deafened everybody. Black smoke filled the room. Glass clattered down. The weapon's charge of nails and rusty iron hit the canal's surface and scattered sleeping ducks. The birds flew off quacking. Plaster fell down from the wall above the window. The acrid fumes of gunpowder made de Gier and Eira-Liisa choke. Karate coughed. Grijpstra wheezed. The Englishman, still holding the blunderbuss, staggered back. Ketchup got hiccups.

Ketchup and Karate, who shared an apartment overlooking the Amstel River, discussed the Finnish/British conflict during next morning's breakfast. Karate, recently returned from leave in Torremolinos, made Spanish omelettes. Ketchup, who had visited the Dutch Antilles, opened cans of chilled curuba juice.

"More fresh bread?"

"If you please."

"So Grijpstra confiscated Eira-Liisa and Michael's passports," Karate said, "and he may return them today brunch time, at Dobbe Sandwich Shop."

"After making sure there are no bad feelings between those two," Ketchup said. "Couple of angels, those two. I bet you de Gier will pick up the bill." He shook his small head. "Pity we couldn't take care of the case, hey?"

Karate didn't know. "We couldn't have done much anyway. They were well-meaning folks caught up in a misunderstanding."

"Don't care for well-meaning folks," Ketchup said. "They're hard to shake down."

Karate agreed. "I would have liked that Eira-Liisa."

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"Our superiors are crazy," Ketchup said, carrying dirty dishes to the kitchen. "Those two bumblers believe in making things better, but this is a time when things get worse. It's nice when things get worse. You get to take money from robbers. You get to abuse beautiful foreign ladies. I like that."

Karate dried while Ketchup washed up. Karate sighed.

Ketchup looked up from the steaming sink. "Going with the flow. You think Grijpstra and de Gier believe they can reverse the tide?"

Karate pondered the matter. "No."

Ketchup dropped a mug back into the suds. "So what do our so-called superiors believe in? In being good in spite of this planet about to shake off its humans? Like we, sincere and therefore cynical observers, believe in following evil?"

"I don't think those two believe in good," Karate said. "They're too smart to go for an obvious solution. I've heard those suckers talk. They seem to prefer to believe in nothing."

Ketchup grinned. He thought that was amusing.

"What?" Karate asked.

Ketchup said he would like to believe in nothing too. That nothing is lighter than either good or evil. "Be totally cool." Ketchup also said he believed it couldn't be done.

"Good luck comes to those who keep trying," Karate said. "Couldn't we try to believe in nothing?"

"Good luck comes to those who keep trying?" Ketchup asked, as he arranged mugs in the cupboard, their ears parallel, every mug shining. "You really think so?"

"What do you think?" Karate said, brushing down the sink.

"Good luck," Ketchup said, "comes to those who are lucky."

Later that day Grijpstra watched Michael and Eira-Liisa walk away stiffly on their way to the Saint Nicholas church to listen to cantatas. They had their passports.

"Couldn't make them dance and kiss," de Gier said, walking ahead of Grijpstra on their way back to the Fiat. "They're still too shy. Maybe once they're alone together again, eh? After the Bach concert?"

"Who cares?" Grijpstra asked.

De Gier sang the tango's tune. "Tah-tah-TAH-tah . . ." He danced to the tune. Grijpstra danced behind him. De Gier suddenly stopped and looked around, making Grijpstra freeze halfway in a sliding step.

"I saw that," de Gier said.●

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Art by Greg Voth

SHIFTER

by Suzanne Jones

It was Alba of the almond eyes who wanted me to see the painter on one of her early morning walks. I had been in Laguna for less than a week in late summer when I first met Alba. I had been sleeping on the beach where she found me, stretching, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, trying to get myself awake. She had been sent to shoo me away by the woman she worked for—the painter she would later want me to see.

"Mister, you go now," she said. "Go now. No stay here. No can sleep here." She looked up at the top of the cliff as if seeking approval from the woman who watched there, too far away to hear us.

I got to my feet slowly, brushing the sand from my blanket. Alba was a small woman, an inch or two shorter than I. I looked into her anxious eyes and knew that she was afraid she could not get me to leave. Her lack of confidence as much as the thickness of her

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accent told me that she no more belonged in this place than I did.

It was not a private beach. California takes pride in there being no private beaches, though the cops take a dim view of sleeping on the beach, and I suspected that the cops in this area did not regard this beach as one as open to the public as others in less exclusive neighborhoods.

In a letter to *EQMM*, Suzanne Jones said, "There are many kinds of predators in Southern California. I was curious as to what might happen if one kind were to bump into another." And so "Shifter" took shape. As usual, Ms. Jones follows her inspiration to a chilling conclusion. ¶

Though not private by law, this beach was made so by its geography. Its ribbon of sand stretched for almost a mile between the emerald green water and the base of a high, rocky cliff. The beach was isolated from others up and down the coast by cliffs at either end which rose so steeply that only the hardier vines and cacti could maintain precarious holds on them. From land, access could only be achieved by a very long staircase of "five thousand steps," according to the locals, presumably one of whom had bothered to count them. With no public parking available at the top of the cliff, very few made it down to that beach who did not live in the luxurious houses which clung to the edge of the precipice with elegant daring. Their cliffside location, however, was not as impractical as it would be farther north, where even gentle rains conspire to wash the ground from under them and send them sliding into the sea. On the cliff at Laguna the houses were anchored firmly in rock, and their security gave them a kind of arrogance, as if their builders possessed vision and prescience, unlike their neighbors up the coast who had unluckily sunk the roots of their houses in cliffs of sand and clay.

I took my eyes from the distant figure who was watching us from above and smiled at the woman in front of me.

"I'm sorry," I said. "You have the loveliest eyes. I'd like to tell you so, but I don't speak Spanish."

She didn't smile, so I didn't know how much she understood. But when I looked back at her from the foot of the wooden staircase that climbed the cliff, she was still watching me.

Two nights later, a couple of skinheads from Oceanside did a

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number on me and left me piled up under the pier at Laguna Beach—which was a very public beach, a wide stretch of white sand with all too easy access. It was Alba who found me there the next morning and took me back to her room.

It had been her day off, and she had walked beneath the pier as she often did early in the morning, looking for sea birds which not infrequently washed up there, feathers gummy with oil. There had been a bad spill that summer, and the bodies of birds were still being found on the shore and upsetting the tourists. She would find those that still had a little life and clean them with solvent she carried in a mason jar. I suppose she knew they would probably die anyway, but she did what she could to preserve their feeble fluttering beneath her fingers.

Her room was in a large house that mainly was given over to a bookstore which occupied all of the first floor and part of the second. The walls of her room were whitewashed and covered with pictures of animals which she had cut out of the magazines the woman she worked for gave her from time to time. It was a fine room, if a little noisy, since it overlooked the narrow main street of Laguna. It had a small refrigerator but no stove, since cooking there was not allowed.

"My brother," she explained to the hard-faced woman with whom she shared the bathroom as she changed the bloody towels. I kept the eye that wasn't swollen shut cast down so that the woman wouldn't see that it was gray, not brown.

The blood in my urine worried Alba, and my refusal to see a doctor distressed her, but she did not persist. She treated me tenderly, but as cautiously as if I were one of her beach creatures, as if I might suddenly fly away.

She loved to wash my hair (which I wear long and usually held back by a rubber band) and tease me about the gray hairs in it. She would lather and shave my face with a blade almost every morning, even after I was able to do it myself. "So smooth," she would say delightedly, stroking my cheeks, and then ask me to repeat all the other English words that meant "smooth" and tell her the differences between them.

"You are a good teacher," she said. "You know words. You were a teacher in a school?"

"A teacher, a doctor, a lawyer, an Indian chief," I said. "I can be anyone." I smiled at her.

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She looked puzzled, but asked no more. As I said, she was cautious.

In a week I was well enough to get a job washing dishes. Even though I knew far more about cooking than did the short-order cook. I could cook, but people usually want references for a cook.

Alba was a shy woman who hadn't had many lovers, and although she was heavy about the hips and thighs, with her long dark hair and almond-shaped eyes she was not unattractive. Her English was so poor that at first I thought her stupid, but the only job she had held in the six months she had been in California was with the painter, who spoke to her only in Spanish. And she hadn't much contact with anyone else. Alba had inherited her job of cleaning the painter's house from one of her aunts, who had become pregnant and gone back to Mexico.

The painter's name was Hilaria Cardona. She was very successful, and she was not Mexican but Spanish, Alba told me proudly. The señora's family in Spain was wealthy and owned racehorses. They lived near Barcelona. According to Alba. Twice divorced, her children grown and gone, Hilaria Cardona lived alone in one of the houses on the edge of the cliff, gave many parties for the people who bought her paintings, and was careless with her money.

"When I first go to her, she leave cash money just lying around. Much money. Now, not so much." She frowned. "Now, almost never."

"She was testing you," I said, "to see if you would take it. If you had, she would have gotten rid of you. Now she trusts you. It sounds as though your señora is very shrewd."

I elaborated on what I meant by shrewd, and Alba nodded. "Maybe," she said. The señora was shrewd in so many other matters that Alba thought I probably was right.

Alba told me that Hilaria was still a beautiful woman, with a great cloud of dark hair, though her body was not as beautiful as when she posed for the nude bronzes which were now scattered about her house. She had lived for a time with a famous sculptor, and these were his parting gifts.

Alba thought that although the señora had been in this country for many years, she must miss Spain. Why else would she give her directions in Spanish, directions which sometimes were difficult for Alba to understand since the Spanish the señora spoke was Castilian. Very high class.

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Thus, until I came to live in Alba's room, she'd had little opportunity to practice her English.

She got every Monday off and usually Thursday evenings. The café where I washed dishes shut down for the season on the Monday after Labor Day. Though the cook there told me there would be plenty of sunny days until well after Christmas, when there would be some rain, the crowds of tourists no longer came after Labor Day, as if it were perceived to be the end of vacation and good weather.

Alba and I would usually spend Mondays together, walking along the beach hand in hand or down the narrow streets of Laguna. One of the galleries there displayed prominently two pictures of the señora's although Alba said that the painter herself did not highly regard them. Most of her paintings were sold at private shows or from her living room. Alba behaved as though the señora thought there was something fundamentally vulgar about displaying them on a public street.

I could see why. They were creations whose delicacy coarsened in bright sunlight. She painted in the style of the French Impressionists, of Monet's dabs of color which trembled with secret knowledge. Of Pissarro and Seurat. And something of Cezanne with his sturdy, sun-washed buildings and bright seas and hard blue skies. The originality of her work lay in her eclecticism, in the way she combined their styles and infused them with the energy of her subject matter: the sweet curve of the highway coming down Laguna Canyon, the swirls of color of the people on the beach.

"Pictures for tourists," Alba said the señora had called them with contempt. The prices the gallery was asking were not, however, contemptuous. The pictures were small but should net the señora one hundred dollars for each square inch of canvas.

Most of the paintings in the senora's home were much bigger, and all were better, Alba told me hurriedly. And sold quickly. And for even higher prices (per square inch) to the wealthy people who were the señora's friends.

The paintings in the window of the gallery didn't much interest me in Hilaria Cardona. There was a calculated prettiness about them that argued something common and commercial. That she herself dismissed them as such did little to mitigate my judgment of them and her.

Alba had wanted me to come with her to the top of the cliff early

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on a Monday morning to see the señora as she walked along the beach. She walked there, Alba said, to keep fit. I thought that Alba wanted me to see the señora to enhance herself in my eyes. This was the woman she worked for, and she would take pleasure from my being impressed by her. But since I have an aversion to meeting people, and little interest in getting up so early on my day off, I put her off.

One weekday there was a very minor grease fire in the kitchen of the café, but as a consequence, we closed early. I decided to walk to the señora's house and see if Alba wanted to come home early. She had told me that the señora would be in San Francisco for a few days with the lawyer with whom she had been involved that summer and fall. The lawyer was short and full of energy. He reminded Alba of a fierce little rooster.

Even though Alba was alone in the house with the dog, an elderly poodle named Henri, she was extremely uncomfortable at my coming there unexpectedly, as if she were certain the señora would not approve. But there I was, and Alba reluctantly showed me through the house, on which the señora had lavished the same painstaking care with which she created her paintings.

It was a long, low adobe house with a red-tiled roof, not uncommon in the area. It was built in a U around a rear-facing veranda which was roofed over with trumpet vines and paved with Saltillo tiles, the large clay tiles which the señora had also installed throughout the house. The tiles had been laid for her by a craftsman she had imported from Mexico who had been just as intimidated by the señora's Spanish as Alba. The señora had demanded that they apply many, many coats of sealer to the porous tile. The treatment of the tiles was labor intensive, but resulted in something quite wonderful, bringing out and preserving the color in the common clay, the soft yellows and reds, so that they did not age to the nondescript, dull, earth brown so commonly found on the floors of buildings and in courtyards of the area.

According to Alba, the señora was always remodeling the house, making it more and more exquisite in its details, from the brilliant mosaic tile, handcut like tiny jewels, on the basin of the bath, to the ornately carved plaster of the bar near the dining area, from the subtle blend of textures of paint sponged by hand on bedroom walls, to the translucent blue of the kitchen cabinets, which had been sanded and lacquered so many times that they reflected images like mirrors.

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And there were of course the paintings, to which Alba pointed with pride. And here they were not exposed to the harsh criticism of sunlight, but were softly lit. The windows of the house were little more than recessed slits in the thick walls and permitted very little natural light to filter into the rooms.

The paintings were everywhere there was available space, paintings of various sizes and subjects, from nudes to waterfalls, from sweeping canvases of San Luis Obispo to miniatures of children. These were paintings less "touristy" to be sure, but derivative still, and none so bold as to clash with any decor so long as it be tasteful and expensive, whether in a California beach bungalow, neo-Victorian townhouse, or Danish-modern loft, from La Jolla to San Francisco to Oklahoma City. Something for everyone. Just pick a dominant color. How about something in blue to go with that couch?

I felt a little dizzy. To clear my head, I stepped through the French doors onto the veranda. The poodle looked up at me dolefully from where it was tethered to one of the pillars supporting the latticework and vines.

The carefully manicured lawn before me was enclosed on two sides by the wings of the house, one of which showed fresh construction: A wheelbarrow and sacks of cement and sand were stacked against one wall. The grass there was trampled and brown.

The sweep of lawn ended at a low adobe wall. Beyond it was shimmering space and then the dark blue sea. At the wall I looked down on the beach and the green waves breaking white against the sand. After the dimness of the house, to look into that space was like flying.

I returned to the house, curious about the new construction. Alba said it was the señora's latest project, a small bedroom–a maid's quarters–off the bathroom in the wing that housed the bedroom that abutted the garage. The señora had made the garage her studio by removing a section of the roof and replacing it with a skylight. The señora often slept in the bedroom next to it when she was working, getting up in the middle of the night if an idea came to her. When she entertained her lawyer, they slept in the larger bedroom in the other wing.

Alba wouldn't let me into the studio. It was locked. The señora only periodically allowed Alba to clean there, and only when she was present.

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The maid's room—Alba's room—was tiny, like a room made for a child. A narrow bed was built into one wall and a chest of drawers stood opposite. Though small, it was exquisitely proportioned. The furniture was three-quarter scale and perfectly suited to the space. The wood of the chest and the bed was simply finished with a white, transparent wash. The floor was the same colorful Saltillo tile, but now was covered with a painter's heavy tarp. The workers could not yet paint the walls since the plaster was still wet. Alba thought it might be ready to be finished as early as next week.

Alba would not live in the room, she explained, but would stay there some nights, the nights of the señora's parties, for example, so that she would not have to walk the mile or so back to her room so late at night. It was dangerous. The señora herself carried a little nickel-plated revolver in her handbag.

I didn't quite believe Alba's safety was the señora's motivation. It seemed too extravagant a gesture for someone who painted as carefully and economically as Hilaria Cardona. But I supposed that the house was as much her creation as her paintings, and done with an eye to what would sell. Though a room for a live-in maid would undoubtedly enhance the value of the property, I suspected that Hilaria might be intending to marry her lawyer and would be demanding more and more of Alba's time until it would be far easier for Alba to stay permanently in that exquisite little room than to continue to make the long walk back into town. And I believed that Alba thought so too, otherwise, why hadn't she mentioned the little bedroom to me before now?

The visit to Hilaria Cardona's house had pricked my curiosity about the señora at last. Her home reflected an ego so monstrous and controlling that I wanted to observe the fleshy shell that housed it. And so it was that early one Monday morning, instead of sleeping in, we made our way to the edge of the cliff at the top of the five thousand steps.

It was a morning made oppressively cool by dampness, a morning in which the fog lay on the surface of the sea and muffled sound. I was afraid the señora might choose to stay indoors and put a fire in her elegant fireplace. I would have. But Alba said no. The señora was a person of discipline and regular habits. And Alba was right. Soon, from where we stood looking down at the beach, I was able to make out a figure descending the stairs from the señora's house. She was alone, but did not seem lonely. She

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took possession of the beach confidently. It was hers except for a few birds. Her neighbors stayed sensibly in their expensive houses.

She reached the beach, walked to the edge of the water where the sand was firm, and began to move quickly along it with fluid, athletic strides. As I watched her I considered why Alba's enthusiasm for taking me to see her mistress had cooled—for it had. I think that when I began to live in Alba's room she wanted me to see the señora for myself so that I would understand her admiration for her, that Alba didn't just work for a rich woman, she worked for an artist, an important, powerful person. At first Alba must have thought I would be as invisible to the señora as she had been. But now she wasn't sure. I might reflect badly on her. Somehow she had come to feel that she had something to risk by bringing me here.

We were too far away for me to make out more than a woman with a great mane of dark hair, moving along the edge of the water. I started down the steps.

"No, you mustn't!" Alba tugged at my elbow.

"I want to get closer. I can't see her from here." I looked back at her imploring face. "Don't worry, she won't know you're with me. She can't recognize you from down there. Just stay here."

I descended the long flight of wooden steps as quickly as I could. I was afraid now that the señora would turn back before I could reach the bottom, but by the time I walked onto the sand, she had only come to the far end of the beach and had just started back. I went down to the water's edge, where she would have to pass me. I stared down at the foam rolling thinly toward my feet then being sucked back into the fog, at the tiny holes made in the sand by the things which lived under it. I would glance casually in the señora's direction from time to time, then lower my eyes. I was not so large that she should be afraid of me, but I didn't want to chance startling or angering her. Even if it was a free beach. Coming across a man, even a small man, alone on a deserted beach had to make her a little uneasy. Maybe even afraid.

She came on steadily, her eyes wide and curious, moving like some exotic animal through a place which had suddenly become unfamiliar to her. The fog can have that dislocating effect. It can change the familiar into foreign territory. It can change everything.

I heard her footsteps, louder and louder. I guessed that she was

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too proud to alter her path much, so I moved away from the stretch of hard wet sand which was hers and averted my face as if I had found something of interest on the cliff. I felt her eyes on me, and then she was by me and I caught the expensive scent of her on the salt air. We had not spoken, and my impression of her was confused and fragmented: She was taller than I, with dark hair and wide, wild eyes, and an energy that fairly crackled from her. She left me the sense of a resolve which was so disconcerting in its intensity that I could not but admire her. Whatever the señora wished to do, her lithe body arrogantly asserted, she would do. I watched her climb the stairs to her house as confidently as any predator. She hadn't been so much afraid of me as wary.

Alba was still waiting for me at the top of the stairs, as common a creature as her mistress was rare. I was completely out of breath by the time I reached her and had to lean over with my hands on my knees as I tried to slow the beating of my heart. Alba was very distressed at that scene on the beach. She wanted to know what we had said to each other. She was wringing her hands, a gesture which reminded me that she was as foreign to me as Hilaria Cardona. But weak and far more vulnerable. Not stupid, but fearful, starting at dangers, both real and imagined. Her anxiety irritated me, and it was several moments before I could collect myself enough to try to calm her.

People have their seasons, and Alba of the almond eyes was a summer person. She was the way I think of Mexico, although I have never been there: full of light, airy people, happy without thought, easily pleased by small kindnesses. Gentle as a kiss. I always feel a little sad when summer goes. In Southern California I thought it might last forever. But nothing does last. As they say, nothing is constant—except change.

It was time. Past time, really.

I think Alba came to be afraid of me in those last few weeks. That was something I did not want but could not help. Her little room was finished and she stayed there more and more frequently. She kept many of her things there now, taking them with her, one by one. She left the pictures of the animals on the walls, and I would come in after work and lie upon her bed to wait for her and look at them: pictures of lion cubs and beribboned kittens and droll owls and befuddled dogs in party hats. Pictures that were so sentimental and naive that they had always annoyed me. That kind of innocence inevitably engenders its own destruction.

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The señora was giving a party shortly before Christmas, a very important party for her important friends: the friends who were her clients, the friends who bought her paintings, and the friends who would buy her paintings. Alba had chattered about it for days. I noticed that the pride Alba had taken in the señora's many accomplishments was subtly but gradually altering her nature. As if in recognition that Alba's sweeping her floors and scouring her sinks and tubs and toilets and washing her clothes had contributed in some measure to the señora's great success in the past few months, the señora had infected Alba with a sense of her own importance which she before had so charmingly lacked.

The señora would be lost without her. The señora simply could not manage without her. And so forth. She bought Alba a new dress to wear in front of these important people, though she continued to be as exacting in her demands of her servant as ever.

The señora was celebrating the sale of several of her paintings to a medical center in Tustin. Alba talked of the caterers who must be dealt with, the kind of food which would be served, the liquor. Champagne and Beluga caviar would dominate and a major crisis arose when it appeared that enough of the Beluga could not be obtained in time, and they would have to subsist on a lesser variety.

It was time. Past time, really. I had become bored with the dish washing. Nothing lasts forever. Summer had been over for a long time.

The night before the party Alba had come back to the room for more of her things. She would be staying with the señora for several days, not only to help with the party, but to clean up afterwards.

I suggested that we walk down to the pier, even though it was very late by the time she got to the room. I told her I had seen a bird there flapping about with an arrow in it, but I had been unable to catch it by myself. I needed her help.

She probably would have gone with me even if I hadn't told her that. She still wanted to please me, and I think her happiness at her growing involvement with the señora made her feel guilty toward me.

Afterwards I came back to the room and took a long, hot shower, which caused the hard-faced woman to bang on the door because of the hot water. Then I lay naked on Alba's bed and looked at the

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pictures of the animals in the flickering lights that streamed in from the street.

The next morning, the morning of the señora's party, I did not go to work. I spent a long time in the bathroom after the hard-faced woman had gone, shaving my legs and chest. I then went out and bought some tanning lotion and hair dye. Back in the room I applied the lotion to my face and hands and wrists and shaved legs and chest. I spent a long time in front of the mirror on my eyebrows, thinning them, arching them. I took the gray out of my hair with the dye. It was almost afternoon by the time I shaved my face, still tender from the tanning lotion, and applied the little makeup that Alba used. I put on Alba's new dress and was pleased at how far the sleeves came down on my wrists. I studied the effect in the mirror on the door of the bathroom. The woman who looked back at me was not unappealing, though a little sallow and somewhat past the bloom of youth. She was too thin, but that couldn't be helped. The dress was already too tight across my shoulders to add any more bulk to my chest. Not all girls were well endowed.

Except for my gray eyes, I could easily have been Alba's countrywoman. I thought the señora would open her door to one of Alba's countrywomen—if she kept her eyes humbly on the toes of her shoes. Besides, she would need my help for her party.

There was no need to knock on her door. Men and women were rushing in and out of it with boxes and foil-wrapped trays and cases of champagne. Their movements had such urgency that I knew I would find her inside.

She looked up at me from a list in her hand and spoke to me in Spanish.

"I'm sorry, I don't speak Spanish."

She frowned. "I said, 'Who are you, and where did you get that dress?'"

"Alba gave it to me before she went back to Mexico. Her sister's baby is very, very sick. Her uncle took her back with him right away. She wanted me to come help you—"

"You're a relative and you don't speak Spanish?"

"Not a relative. A friend."

I looked into her eyes, dark with suspicion, but she was distracted almost immediately by a crash from the kitchen.

She rushed to the spot and let loose a stream of Spanish that cut into the unlucky deliverer like a whip.

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When she paused to draw breath, she threw an apron at me. "Clean this up," she said.

And so I stayed, cleaning up various messes as quickly as I could, arranging the hors d'oeuvres along the ornately carved bar, chilling glasses, thrusting the bottles of champagne into tubs of ice. We were ready, of course—just as she had planned—in time for her to shower and dress for the evening. Before she did, she showed me to Alba's little room and told me I could stay there for the night.

Which was over before the party ended. The last of the partygoers did not depart until after breakfast. I helped the señora scramble eggs with green chilies and several pounds of bacon and sausages. And of course serve the champagne. Though the señora had a glass in her hand throughout the evening, I never saw her drink from it. She would absent herself from time to time to freshen her makeup. Now it was almost eight o'clock in the morning, and the only evidence that she had been on her feet for fourteen hours was the shadows under her eyes.

On the other hand, my back ached and my eyes felt like they were full of sand. And I, of course, had drunk nothing.

Finally the last of the guests departed and the señora and her lawyer retired. She had been very pleased to discover that I could cook and promised we would talk about an arrangement later in the day. Until Alba could return.

I fell fully clothed into Alba's little bed and let sleep take me.

The expensive scent of her woke me. She told me that she and the lawyer had to meet some people in Tustin. She would be back in the evening and we would talk.

I showered in the señora's bathroom, not in the one between Alba's room and the large bedroom next to the garage, but the señora's magnificent bathroom, with its elevated tub and skylight and bits of tile that sparkled like jewels. I dried myself with soft towels that had the scent of her.

At one end of the large closet in her bedroom I found some of the lawyer's things. I put on some slacks and a white dress shirt that had his monogram worked into the cuffs. His clothes fit me fairly well, but both pairs of shoes in the closet were too small, so I put back on the sneakers I had worn to walk to the señora's house from town. I had worn my own sandals throughout the party.

I finished picking up, collecting the glasses, putting dishes away. I did no more cleaning, but it pleased me to restore her

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house to order. I went through her house slowly, getting to know it, absorbing it and absorbing her. I found the money she had left carelessly on a bedside table. I smiled and added a quarter to it. I made my way eventually to the door into the garage. Though locked, it didn't take me long to find the key.

The smell of turpentine still hung in the air, even though I knew she could not have worked there for hours. It was growing late in the afternoon, but there was still light enough to see. The light grayed the room, falling over stacks of paintings, muting their colors. Many were unfinished. Some I supposed would be reworked. A few looked as though she had been trying a different technique, a bolder, slashing line, but I could see that they were not successful, as if she could not maintain her vision, and she had laid them aside in dissatisfaction.

There was a long table where she stretched her canvases. Scraps of canvas and wood still littered it. I picked up a pair of scissors that had long, thin blades like twin knives. I snapped them open and shut for a moment, then slipped their handle into my hip pocket.

I pulled the cloth from the canvas on the easel. This was the work in progress—although I suspected the señora had many works in progress, as first one and then another disappointed her or bored her.

It was a nude reclining. It was the most successful of what I thought of as her "new style" of bold lines and flat planes. New for the señora, that is. It wasn't new. It was as if Roualt had married with Cezanne. Expressionist with Post-Impressionist. She wouldn't be able to sustain it, and she must have known she couldn't sell it.

As stylized as the figure was, I knew it was Alba. The familiar curves of hip and thigh. The small breasts. Alba of the almond eyes. The painted eyes looked back at me languorously, full of sad knowledge. The señora must have painted it from watching Alba stoop and scrub and sweep. Imagining the form beneath her dress. Alba never said she had posed for her.

I rummaged through the tubes of paint in the box on the table next to the easel until I found the colors I wanted, mixed them with turps, then began to paint.

I wasn't very good. Not as good as I had remembered being. But that had been in school, a long, long time ago. I lost all track of time as I tried to make it right, tried to get exactly right the way Alba had looked the last time I saw her.

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The light failed me but I painted on by artificial light. It was so hard to translate vision into the small precise movements required to transfer paint to canvas. I was clumsy. When I finished, I felt as drained, as lifeless as the painted creature. It was as good as I could make it, but the clash of styles and technique was inevitable, and I was not especially pleased with my effort.

I did not switch off the light. I closed the door to the studio but did not lock it.

I went back to Alba's little room, took the scissors out of my back pocket, put them on the dresser, and lay down on the bed. I may have slept, because I was suddenly aware of the sound of the car in the drive. Her quick footsteps in the hall. As I had intended, she had noticed the light in the garage as she came in. I slipped out of bed and picked up the scissors from the dresser and squeezed by it to the door. It was as if the room had become too small for me.

I was through the bathroom and into the large bedroom by the time I heard her scream. The bedroom was completely dark except for the crack of light at the door to the studio. Then she flung open the door. The light behind her threw her into silhouette: She was black, featureless, and terrifying.

Though the scissors were ready in my hand, I took a step back before the fierceness of her. I saw the flash from her hand as I heard the shot and felt a great fist slam into my chest, knocking me hard against the wall. I tried to get my breath but she kept firing, again and again, but if I was hit again, I felt nothing. I slid down the wall and sat against it.

She came forward cautiously, with uncertain step. The smell of cordite filled the air, obliterating her scent.

I wondered if she was thinking about the stains on her beautiful tile. Then I was at the low wall at the edge of her cliff looking down through air that trembled in the light. Below me the gulls wheeled on the wind. I looked down on their backs, blinding white in the sun.

It was time. Past time, really. ●

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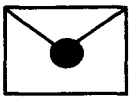

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KENDRA

by D. A. McGuire

Kendra Patterson was intense. Studied. Serious. Resolute and determined. Single-minded.

"Perceptive," her great-aunt Milly said.

"Shrewd," remarked Edna, Milly's sister.

"And frightening," Lily, Edna's middle-aged daughter, added.

"Has an unusually long attention span," Kendra's first-grade teacher said.

"Can block out everything around her, unusual powers of concentration," Kendra's second-grade teacher said.

"Intelligent, no doubt about it, but I worry about her emotional health," the third-grade teacher added.

"Emotional health?" laughed Great-Aunt Milly. "She's fine as she is!"

"Healthy and happy, what's wrong with that?" Edna asked.

"But I find it hard to remember she's a child sometimes, the way she looks at me," Lily added. "She's always scowling, and does she ever blink those eyes?"

No, it seemed she didn't. Kendra Patterson had a way about her that unnerved most people, of staring so hard and so long—without the slightest movement of her face or flicker of her eyelids—that it was hard indeed to remember she was only a little girl, eight years old. There was something about her . . .

Something about Kendra that reminded Milly Patterson of her own mother. The way Kendra stared, the way she observed people, twisting and turning her neck gracefully while her features remained perfectly rigid and expressionless. And as for her eyes . . .

Well, yes, Milly had noticed, too, that Kendra seldom blinked those huge, dark-lashed, and scowling eyes, yet what did that matter? She was a healthy and . . .

A happy child. Though she seldom smiled. Did it really matter that from ages four to six she'd spent most of her time before the television set watching cartoons and children's shows for hours on end without a single smile or the slightest grin?

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For that's how it was until the day Kendra got up from that television set—this little girl in a house of old women who'd found the television to be a godsend—and announced, without smiling and with all due solemnity: "I think I'll read for a while now."

"Fine, dear," Milly had said, anticipating trips to the library and buying secondhand books at the discount store—a small price to pay to keep a child occupied.

Edna had smiled, adding her approval. Kendra was always able to "entertain herself." This would be no different from the hours spent before the television.

Only Lily cringed, understanding all too well what this would really mean . . .

That Kendra would turn her single-mindedness and formidable powers of concentration from the television programs that had once so absorbed her to the written page, because for Kendra Patterson "a while" could translate into weeks . . .

Months.

Even years.

Kendra made that terse announcement shortly before her sixth birthday and was still reading when she turned eight. At first it was one book a day, then two, and then three; books night and day, before and after school, in the good weather and the bad. Books outside at the playground where Edna and Lily dutifully took her hoping to expose her to other children. Such attempts at social interaction seldom succeeded. Kendra was "reading," she told the children there, and would play with them "later."

But when was later? Later, for most children, was a matter of minutes, half an hour or an hour at most. But for Kendra, single-minded, staring, unblinking, concentrated Kendra Patterson, later meant years . . .

"She's patient," Milly said lovingly. "Never saw such a patient child."

"Uncommonly easy to raise, from what I remember about my own," Edna remarked, giving a scathing glance to Lily, who nervously added:

"She's not human."

"Nonsense, of course she's human," Milly disclaimed. "She's a serious little girl, is all. The world would be a better place if we had more serious little girls . . . as well as adults." Milly Patterson glanced at her niece, the unmarried Lily, meaningfully.

Lily Wright was going on forty but still lived with her mother and maiden aunt and now the little girl who had come to them on

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the death of her parents three years ago. It was Lily who had insisted that Kendra see a specialist. "Just to be sure."

So with great reluctance, Milly consented for Kendra to see a psychologist. After all, it wasn't just Lily; the third-grade teacher, too, had questioned Kendra's ability to fit in with her classmates. "She seems to be inhabiting a world of her own," she said. "Possibly, her parents' deaths . . ."

But after several tests— which proved little but the "high intellectual ability" and emotional stability of little Kendra Patterson — the appointments had ceased.

Ceased after Kendra Patterson announced to her great-aunt: "This is a waste of time. There's nothing wrong with me. I just want to read."

Gratefully, Milly agreed, a decision supported by Edna and criticized by Lily.

"There's something definitely wrong about that child," Lily claimed.

But no one took Lily very seriously.

"Kendra reminds me of my own mother," Milly said often, and loudly, to those other relatives—and well-meaning friends—who also (carefully and gently) suggested that perhaps something was "not quite right" about Kendra Patterson.

"She's merely strong-willed and intelligent and knows exactly what she wants to do. The world would be a better place if more children—and adults—knew exactly what they wanted to do," Milly told them.

"She's happy the way she is," Edna concurred. "Why try to change her?"

"It's not a question of changing her," Lily argued, the lone dissenting voice in the household. "Perhaps she's autistic."

"Nonsense," Milly snorted. "She talks to me. She talks to you. She talks to her teachers. Autistic! Where did you get such an idea?"

"You read too many books. You watch too many educational programs," Edna told her daughter.

"But she has no emotions, no feelings," Lily argued on, aware of the rising desperation in her voice.

"Of course she has emotions. Has she ever spoken an unkind word in all the time we've had her? Has she ever abused or mistreated an animal? Kendra is the way she is because she . . . just is." Even Milly Patterson knew that her arguments sometimes sounded flat. But this time they were final.

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"And hasn't she been kind to old Mrs. Bright across the road?" Edna said, finally adding an original thought to the conversation.

Which was so amazing that both Edna's sister and her daughter turned to her, speechless, coffee cups raised to their lips.

"Well, she has been," Edna said, enjoying the moment, sitting back in the overstuffed chair so she could glance out the large picture window in their front sitting room. "I see Kendra speak to Mrs. Bright every day. There, look, she's out there now."

This was even more amazing, so much so that both Milly and Lily had to rise and move to see out the window, for indeed there Kendra was, book in hand, standing at Mrs. Bright's mailbox, and it did seem that, yes, the little dark-haired, dark-eyed, and extremely intense child was speaking to old Mrs. Bright.

Old Mrs. Bright, nearing ninety, who lived with a husband some twenty years younger in the white cottage with the green shutters across the road. It seemed Mrs. Bright might even be smiling, chuckling a bit at something Kendra was saying.

And then, look there, Edna wanted to cry out (but didn't): Kendra is actually showing the book to Mrs. Bright—and goodness! (which is what Edna muttered, pretending to clear her throat after she did) Mrs. Bright is actually taking the book from Kendra's hand. Kendra was turning the pages and pointing out something in the book to her.

Lily spoke first. "Well, look at that. Do you think that perhaps . . ."

"Perhaps what?" Milly snapped impatiently. Something in the little scene outside bothered her— not frightened or upset her, but annoyed her. Suddenly she knew what Lily was going to say next:

"Do you think maybe we should have taken an interest in . . . in what Kendra's interested in? That perhaps we should have sat and watched a television show with her when she was younger, or even . . . that maybe we should have . . ."

All three women were shuddering as Lily said this. They remembered all too well the kind of shows Kendra had watched:

All kinds of mindless children's shows. Shows with adults dressed in great colorful costumes as they danced and sang and paraded various other adults dressed like animals across the television screen.

And other shows with puppets and cartoon characters careening into one another in vividly drawn cars and other impossible conveyances.

Even some shows where older children engaged in "adventures" and mysteries, or learned to speak French or Spanish and tried to

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convince their youthful audience how much fun math or science or geography could be.

So to imagine that any one of them might have wanted to sit and watch such things, if even for only a few minutes, was . . . unthinkable.

"No, definitely not," Milly said firmly. "For what point?"

"I have to agree with my sister," Edna said.

"But if we had watched with her, or read with her, then maybe we would have had something in common . . . " Lily ventured.

"In common with an eight-year-old child?" Milly scoffed, recalling her mother again, a woman she had admired and respected . . . but in all truth, had never really understood.

"Well, she may not have any friends her own age, but it looks as if she has a friend in Mrs. Bright," Lily said, turning away from the window and enjoying the fact that she had observed—and commented on—something neither older woman had.

For it did seem that Kendra Patterson had a new friend, and from that day hence, every afternoon after school the three women noticed the little girl out at the mailbox, speaking to old Mrs. Bright. This was odd enough, but what was even more odd was that sometimes it did appear that Kendra was smiling at the old woman.

Of course, it wasn't the same situation with old Mr. Bright. He was a disagreeable old fellow, a retired gardener who now kept a large vegetable garden behind his cottage. He seldom came out to the street, as Mrs. Bright did, except to scowl at a delivery man or chase a dog out of the flower bed he kept along his front fence.

Kendra Patterson gave him the same look she gave her aunts: cool, studied, concentrated, eyes unblinking, dark brows slightly downturned.

Old Mr. Bright didn't care for Kendra much and tried to stare her down once when he, not his wife, came out to fetch the mail one cool fall afternoon. He found he couldn't do it—he blinked first. Obviously the little girl had more practice than even he in looking taciturn, resolute, determined.

But then, as he turned to walk back up the drive toward his side door, mail in hand, he was startled and surprised to hear a voice behind him . . . a little girl's voice.

He realized, suddenly, that he'd never heard the peculiar little girl—who'd lived across the street for the past three years with her eccentric aunts—speak.

"Where's Mrs. Bright?" she had said.

"Mrs. Bright?" He turned, startled by the sound of his own voice,

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too. If he used it at all out here by the road it was to shout at a paperboy for throwing his paper in the bushes or to harangue the delivery man from the local grocery store for substituting cling peaches for the pears in heavy syrup he always ordered.

"Where is she?" Kendra repeated firmly, book clutched in her hand.

"The wife? Oh, the wife's been taken ill, she has," he said, walking back toward her, his head bent down. The Brights had never had children, a fact for which Mr. Bright was eternally grateful. And now, facing the little girl, he was guessing how close she'd let him get before she backed away, turned and bolted, or even . . . best of all . . . ran crying off to the nest of old biddies she lived with.

Old Mr. Bright was not the nicest of characters.

But Kendra Patterson didn't move a muscle or blink an eye as she said: "That's not what I asked you. Where is she?"

"Well, hell, she's in the house, now ain't she?" Mr. Bright snapped, laughing as he did; then he turned and spit in the road. There, he thought, that ought to scare her . . . because he realized his presence had done nothing to frighten or alarm her. But she barely moved. She certainly didn't flinch. She looked at him with those huge, dark, scowling eyes with a hate he could nearly feel, it was so sharp and keen.

It then occurred to him that he'd never felt such a strong emotion coming from a child—or coming from anyone—and it worried him then and bothered him later to know he could be so affected.

"Give her this," Kendra said, thrusting her book at him. It was a child's oversized book with a gaudy cover depicting flying horses and some kind of fairies and elf-creatures. Then she turned around and marched straight back to her aunts' house.

"Hey, wait one minute, I ain't your errand boy, you know," old Mr. Bright shouted after her.

Kendra only turned for a moment, her somber, dark eyes still scowling, and said in a voice that was decidedly more adult than childlike: "Just give it to her."

Mrs. Bright didn't come out to the mailbox the following day, the next day, or even the day after that. So each day Kendra Patterson met Mr. Bright at the mailbox instead. There she'd be, with a different book tucked under her arm, and each day she asked—no, she demanded— that Mr. Bright give his wife the book.

He took them because he really didn't see any alternative. In fact, he was wishing he'd refused that first day, told the child that

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his wife was too ill to read, and certainly too ill to read a children's book. But day after day he found himself obediently taking the book from her hand, saying nothing, then watching her march solemnly back to her aunts' house.

This went on for more than a week and Mr. Bright found himself trying to think of ways to avoid the child. Instead of going out to the mailbox around three, right after the mail delivery, he decided to go at odd times, at four o'clock, or even as late as five. But Kendra would always be there; evidently she watched his house and as soon as he appeared at his door, she'd come out and walk down to the mailbox. So he moved the time up further, to six, and then even waited one day until long past dark and went out to get his mail at eight, but Kendra was there, marching down to the mailbox, book under her arm.

"Hell," he muttered that night, watching her small figure return to her house, "kid's got a damn one-track mind. She must sit there watching out her window, just waiting for hours!"

So the next day he figured he'd outwit her at last: He'd collect his mail very late, right before he turned in for bed, ten o'clock; the child had to go to bed sometime, didn't she?

Except that as he stepped out of his house in the cool darkness he noticed the light on in the Pattersons' house, in the front window, and there, framed against the light, was a tiny dark head.

"Damn again," he muttered, hating to give in, surrendering all the same as he backed into his house. "Don't that kid go to bed at night? Who the hell's raising her over there, anyhow?"

So he didn't collect his mail that day. It sat in the box overnight and this bothered him. His monthly copy of Organic Farmer was due, as well as the seed catalogues he enjoyed reading through the winter months. But as it turned out he'd discovered the perfect solution: wait until he saw her solemn little figure mount the steps of the morning school bus, watch until the bus was safely down the road, then slip quickly out to the mailbox and collect the mail.

This time, with no little dark-eyed, intense child staring at him, demanding he deliver a book he never did; they were stacked in a pile on his kitchen counter until he could figure out what to do with them. But it was heartening to know he had found a way—for now—to avoid her. For the moment Mr. Bright felt strangely liberated.

Until school let out, and the bus pulled away, and Mr. Bright looked up to see Kendra Patterson still in her school coat, with her school bag over one shoulder, walking down his driveway. She had a book under her arm.

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"Damn," he muttered. He'd been preparing to work in his garden a bit, see if there were any beets or turnips still left in the cold ground. Now he was facing this determined child as she walked toward him, book in hand.

"Give this to Mrs. Bright," she demanded, thrusting the book at him.

"Now, let me tell you something," he began, leaning on his shovel, "The wife's too ill to read all these books you've been sending her. She told me to tell you so."

"Let her tell me so," Kendra said, and turned to walk up the stairs which led to the side doorway of the house.

"Now hold on, hold on—" He was right behind her and actually had to touch her arm to make her stop and turn around. As soon as she did he pulled his hand away. "What I mean is that Mrs. Bright is very sick, very sick indeed. Can't have no visitors. In fact . . ." He paused, studying her small, determined face . . . the very small, very determined, and yet expressionless face that was starting to give him the shivers.

Yes, he realized, his heart was racing yet he felt very cold . . . very frightened as he heard himself saying:

"Mrs. Bright is in the hospital. You know she's going on ninety, and . . . well . . . she ain't in the house is what I'm trying to say or I'm sure she'd love to have you come in and visit."

What was in those eyes, he wondered, those deeply set, slightly sinister and unblinking eyes, that sent a chill down his spine? The way she was looking at him, it was almost as if she was saying: You're lying. And the way her eyes turned to the shovel he was leaning on . . . and then out toward the garden where he'd already started to dig a hole? For a moment he wondered what she would say next . . .

"When will she be home?" is what Kendra Patterson said next.

"Can't rightly say," he replied, still nervously, shifting his weight against the shovel. "Can't rightly—"

"Give her this," she said, interrupting him, pushing the book out to him.

And then she turned, marched back down the driveway, and crossed the road to her aunts' house.

Dinner at the Patterson house was generally cheerful, the conversation smart and animated as Milly pontificated and Edna agreed and Lily tried—without much success—to add a note or comment that might be contrary to either woman's views.

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But it was a conversation that never included Kendra Patterson, sitting quietly and obediently at the far end of the table. Not that she was deliberately excluded; it was simply that any and every query put to her was answered with a monosyllable, a nod, or, most often, a simple dark-eyed stare. The women had long ago given up most attempts to include Kendra in even the most inane of conversations. And over time, as this became their—and Kendra's—preferred mealtime habit, they became accustomed to it.

So she sat, the little girl who ate every bit of food put before her, from lamb chops to Brussels sprouts. She never refused a thing, never asked for more, or less, never commented on the meal at all. She ate with neither a dearth nor an abundance of enthusiasm.

Except tonight, on the day she had crossed the road to speak to Mr. Bright, when she said this (right after finishing her Grapenut pudding and setting aside her spoon):

"I think Mr. Bright killed his wife."

Right in the middle of the dessert course Kendra Patterson made this announcement, and said it with such seriousness, such conviction, that Milly Patterson, who was instructing Edna on the proper way to poach an egg, stopped in mid sentence, drew in a deep breath, and looked down the table at her grandniece.

In fact, all three women stared at Kendra, mouths agape.

It had been Lily who had commented, just a day ago, on the fact that Mrs. Bright hadn't been at her mailbox, and that she'd seen Kendra handing over her books to old Mr. Bright instead. That had been strange in itself, yes, but anything involving Kendra was strange.

It took them all a moment to recover, Milly Patterson doing so first:

"That's nonsense, dear, I spoke to Mr. Bright just this morning. While you were at school. He was out yelling at . . . that is, he was speaking to the milkman and I asked him how Elvira was . . . Elvira's his wife, you know."

Kendra made no comment, just stared at her aunt with her great, dark, intense eyes.

"And he told me she was feeling poorly and might have to go into the hospital for a little while. So you see, he hasn't killed his wife."

"Of course not," Edna added.

"What nonsense," Lily remarked uneasily.

"Have you seen her there?" Kendra asked, throwing them into surprise and confusion. For Kendra to offer a comment at the din-

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ner table had been unusual enough, but for her now to engage in conversation was astonishing.

"Have I seen . . . who . . . where?" Milly asked, her spoon still poised in midair, a dollop of Grapenut pudding on it. She still hadn't recovered from the fact Kendra had spoken.

"Have you seen Mrs. Bright in the hospital?" Kendra said evenly and without any sign of impatience.

"Well, no, of course not, I mean . . . we're not so familiar as to visit, but maybe . . ." Milly felt herself falter. The control of the conversation had suddenly and inexplicably deserted her.

"Maybe we can send a card from the three of . . . I mean, from the four of us," Edna piped in, happy to have the opportunity to initiate something.

"That's a perfectly lovely idea," Lily agreed.

Kendra stared a moment longer at her Aunt Milly, who was still apparently speechless . . .

Though actually Milly Patterson was thinking back on her mother once again, how single-minded and stubborn a woman she had been. She was wondering if Kendra was really as single-minded, and if she were . . .

Well, Milly dreaded the possible outcome of this, for if Kendra, even for a moment, believed Mr. Bright had killed his wife, no matter how ludicrous the idea was, then she would never be satisfied with merely sending a card.

Oh no, Kendra would need a good deal more than that to convince her Mrs. Bright was still alive.

"Well, I don't see why we can't . . ." Milly said, giving her approval, which of course would be necessary before any action was taken.

"Oh, that's marvelous. I'll ask Mr. Bright for the name of the hospital tomorrow," Edna put in.

"And I'll go and buy the card at the drugstore in the morning," Lily said excitedly.

And Kendra lifted her glass of milk and finished it to the bottom —as she always did.

There was no further discussion on the topic that evening.

The following afternoon, directly after the school bus had driven away, Kendra walked into the house and straight up to her eldest aunt—something Milly Patterson had nervously anticipated all day. With a great sigh, she turned to her sister and her sister's

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daughter, then, looking back at the frowning child, waited for what she knew would come.

Not a question. Not a simple inquiry. But a demand: "Did you get it?" the child asked. "Did you send it? Did he tell you where to send it?"

"Well, yes, we did buy a card, a rather lovely card," Milly began.

"And we signed your name, dear, because we thought—" Edna burbled, stopping suddenly at the sight of her elder sister's fierce stare.

"Which I told the both of them they should not have done," Lily interjected, undeterred this time by the fast and furious frowns of the two older women. "I told them they should have waited, let you sign it yourself. I told them—"

"And then who carried the card out to the mailbox?" Milly demanded almost, but not quite, as forthrightedly as little Kendra herself would have done.

"But it just seemed like the sensible thing to do," Edna replied, sucking in a little breath as she did.

"The sensible thing?" Lily almost laughed. "The foolish thing! Indeed!" And then, looking at Kendra as though she were an adult, told her: "Your foolish Aunt Edna took it upon herself to walk out to the mailbox and ask Mr. Bright for his wife's address—"

"Which was quite a sensible thing to do," Milly interrupted, moved—though she knew not why—to defend her sister's action.

Something that Lily, suddenly on a roll, decided to ignore:

"And while she was out there, the man actually had the bad manners to reach out and take the card right from her hand," Lily continued on.

"He was only doing us a favor, Lily dear," Milly interrupted again, bobbing her white head as she did. "Saved us the cost of a stamp, didn't he?"

"He said he'd deliver the card to his wife himself, save us the . . ." Lily gave a damning look first to her mother, then her aunt, "trouble of mailing it off. Nonsense. I'm starting to think the child may have hit on something. Maybe he did murder the old woman, bury her in the backyard."

"Lily!" It was Edna who reacted first. "You can't be serious!"

"Nonsense," scowled Milly, coming in an uneasy and unusual second, "I know for a fact that the man adores his wife. I have it on good . . ." She felt her eyes being drawn down to the still, silent, and staring child before her. " . . . authority that the Brights were on the very best of terms. Of course, I don't know

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from first-hand experience, we've always had a distant . . . but . . . amicable relationship, but . . ." She paused, pursing her lips, realizing not for the first time in her life that the sight of Kendra's dark-eyed stare had stricken her to silence.

"Your Aunt Milly is right," Edna said, coming to Milly's defense. "We have mutual friends . . ." She looked at her sister uncertainly. "at church, and . . ." Then back to the scowling, unmoving, and undeterred Kendra. "From all accounts the Brights were devoted to one another."

"Devoted?" Lily scoffed. "Whoever told you that?"

"Oh, you know who I'm talking about," Edna insisted. "The Murphys know the Brights and the Carters and . . ."

"Of course," Milly interjected, "and Mrs. Fortner, the florist, she told me the two are still very much in love. Why, he sends her flowers every year on her birthday and anniversary."

And so the women went on, arguing among themselves as Kendra Patterson, single-minded and determined as ever, turned and walked out of the house, went across the long front lawn, past the mailbox, and across the street to the Brights.

She found old Mr. Bright in the backyard, digging in his garden, turning the soil and leaning over occasionally to pull a dark and blackened beet or carrot from the ground to toss into the compost pile at the corner of the garden. At first he didn't see her, neither did he hear her approach. . . . He realized later it was almost a sixth sense that detected the little figure coming up on his right, and when he did he nearly had a heart attack right then and there—

Or that's how he put it to himself later. Suddenly he could feel his heart in his throat, and taste the pea soup he'd made for himself at two: Kendra Patterson was just there, scowling up at him from under those thick, black brows, staring up at him with those great, unblinking eyes, not saying a word.

For a moment he was speechless, catching his breath, thinking how foolish it was to let such a tiny slip of a thing unnerve him so. He pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket, wiped his forehead, and demanded: "Well? What is it now? You got another damned book?"

Then he saw she had no book this time, just the power of her eyes, her stare. She in her little schoolgirl jumper and sweater, her hands tucked behind her back, looking up at him as though she didn't fear a thing in the world.

Which was a funny thing, too, he realized later, that there could

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be anyone in this world so small who wasn't afraid of him. Didn't he frighten that damned paperboy? And what about the milkman and the fellow from the grocer's? He'd been terrorizing them for years and hell, wasn't the grocer's delivery man at least six foot? As for children, he'd never had a way with children, never wanted a way with them. Still, the few he'd encountered in his nearly seventy-two years all seemed to have had one feeling for him: fear.

"Did you see her today?" Kendra finally asked, and then, not waiting for a response: "Did she get the card?"

"You mean the wife?" he snapped back gruffly. "Of course she got the card. Happy now? I got work to do." He turned away, leaning over with a groan to retrieve the shovel he'd dropped when she'd startled him and he'd turned to see her staring up at him.

"Tell her to write me a letter," Kendra said—no, rather, she demanded.

Cheeky little thing, he thought, demanding something like that. But when he turned to tell her what he thought of her damned arrogance, she was already marching up the drive back to her house.

"Damned if I'll tell her to write you anything," he muttered as he watched her cross the road.

There was no letter from Mrs. Bright the next day, nor the day after. He watched her as she waited out by the mailbox for the mail truck to pull up and deliver its cargo into her hands, then pull away. She looked through all the mail, the letters and the magazines, and then, apparently dissatisfied, she pulled the mailbox cover down, fished around inside it with her little hand, and then looked in as though something might have gotten by her.

It was almost comical, he thought to himself, chuckling. And then she lifted her head and looked across the road to his house.

He stopped chuckling and felt a cold shudder move up his spine and across his shoulders. She had turned away, was returning to her house.

"Damned kid." He'd gotten tired of fetching his mail a day late, after she'd gone off to school. He'd tried once more to go and get it late at night, but was so certain he could make out her little face staring from a window across the way that he'd retreated back to his house instead.

"Damned kid," he muttered again as he searched the bureau drawers for his medicine. It'd been years since that bad spell he'd had, years since he'd felt the need for the pills to still the sudden ache beneath his breastbone.

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Probably just gall bladder trouble, anyhow. His father had had problems with gall bladder, indigestion, ulcers, the whole lot of stomach complaints. So what if he'd never had any problem that way before—he was over seventy, wasn't he? About time something cropped up. It always did if you lived long enough.

Still, it bothered him, believing that the little girl might be watching his house. It was getting so he couldn't even get up to use the bathroom in the middle of the night—something he did with increasing frequency—without wanting to look out a window, see if she was there . . .

It wasn't possible, he told himself. He was imagining things. That little dark shape in the window—the big window the Patterson women had in their front room—it had to be a lamp, or the way a curtain had been hung. It couldn't be the little kid, watching his house. How was it possible? Didn't the kid sleep? Didn't the old women over there see to it she went to bed?

But they were strange old women. Hadn't Ellie always said so? That the Patterson women were a strange trio: two maiden aunts, one who'd been married only long enough to produce a single child? Strange trio, those were Ellie Bright's words.

If only she were here for him to say to her, not a strange trio, a strange quartet, that's for sure.

Two days later he was working out near his garage when he realized he was being watched again— and this time not from across the street in the dark, but from up close. He jumped a little, dropped his shovel, and turned to confront the little dark-eyed, dark-haired girl again. Someone had braided and pinned her hair back, but the eyes, the expression, all of that hadn't changed, never did.

"Did you tell your wife to write a letter?" she demanded.

"Damn . . ." he muttered, reaching for his handkerchief. His heart was racing. In fact, there was a very distinct pain there, right above his stomach, no, under his lungs, no . . .

Damn, suddenly he couldn't exactly feel where the pain was coming from.

" 'Course I did," he muttered. "But she's sick. Sick. Do you understand? Hey? Too sick to write to you. And too sick to read books or cards or anything else, damn it. Now . . ." Suddenly it felt like a screw was twisting around inside him, pulling at everything and knotting it all up. He actually had to struggle not to sit down. He'd be damned if she'd affect him like this.

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"When she's better, tell her to write a letter," the child said, unmoving, eyes unblinking as she looked up at him, oblivious to his pain.

And then, just as he felt the pain subside, drift away inside him, he felt the child's eyes turn from him and look down at the hole he'd been digging . . .

A great deep hole, two feet across, three feet down, almost perfectly cylindrical. Then he watched as her large dark eyes moved across the lawn to his garden . . .

"It's a garbage hole," he said warily, not even knowing why he did. He reached down for the shovel. "Ain't you never seen one?"

The eyes rotated back to him and for some reason he felt moved to explain:

"A hole for a garbage can. The man, you know, the man with the pig farm? He puts a can down in the hole and then comes to collect the garbage later and, the old hole, on the other side . . ." He nodded to the garage. " . . . was filling up with water. So I'm . . ." He drove the shovel down beside the hole as if to demonstrate. " . . . digging a new one."

The eyes didn't blink, just looked up at him, and in those eyes he read disbelief.

"Damn, I really don't care if you believe me or not," he found himself saying. "Now, I think you'd better run along. I got work to do and . . . and you'll just be in my way. So get on now, go home . . . go on now."

She went after that, trotting back down the driveway, across the road to her house, giving him one backwards glance over her shoulder as she did. But as soon as she was safely in her own house he sat down on the ground, wiped his forehead again, and put his hand on his chest.

Suddenly the pain was back.

So it went. Every few days she'd suddenly just be there, at his elbow or just behind him. He never saw or heard her approach. She was just there, always with the same demand:

"Did you tell her to write a letter?"

And always he'd say the same thing, sometimes angrily or impatiently, and other times gently, or what he felt was gently: "Now, listen, if my wife could write you, I'm sure she would, but she's really, really sick. . . ."

Though those words always fell on deaf ears . . . or did they? Because he didn't like the way she seemed to study him, no . . . the way she seemed to accuse him . . . and the way her eyes

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always turned to the garden, the newly dug garbage hole out by the garage, and then back to him . . .

As if to say, there's more here and we both know it. But she didn't speak it. No, not that she had to . . . because every time she left and returned home, trotting away, looking over her shoulder at him as she did, he'd feel the pain clutch at his chest and he'd have to sit down.

He'd found the pain pills, had started taking them again until they ran out, then knew he'd have no choice but to see his doctor, tell him what the problem was, have some tests done—and he hated doctors, he hated tests and pills and hospitals; he detested the whole medical world. But he'd have to do all that just to get a new prescription.

If only she wouldn't keep reappearing like she did. As he was turning the flower bed and putting pine needles over it for the winter. Or as he was digging up some old roots from a small pine tree that he'd chopped down earlier in the fall. He wanted to get them out before the ground froze.

It was then it dawned on him what was prompting her little visits—any time he was in the yard with a shovel.

And on the day he realized that, he sat in his living room, staring at a television show he no longer saw or heard, and said to himself: "I'll be damned. I'll be damned. She knows."

"Quite a shame. Quite a shame," Milly Patterson was tsk-tsking as she sat at her dining room table, reading through the newspaper. She'd just finished reading the lovely note card that had also just arrived. "But I think she'll take it well, considering. Perhaps going suddenly like that is the best way, the way we all should."

Edna was shaking her white head, agreeing, echoing her sister's sentiments. "Quite an untimely death, I'd say. A man his age has another ten or twenty years before him."

"The bad with the good. I don't know how . . ." Milly paused as Kendra came into the room, standing resolutely beside her Aunt Lily. "Have you told her?" Milly asked her niece.

"Yes. Kendra's been told," Lily said. "After all, she saw the ambulance last night. She had to have known."

Kendra walked forward, straight to her eldest aunt's chair, put both hands purposefully on its wooden arm, and looked at her aunt as she said:

"Kendra, Mr. Bright died last night. I know that may be hard for you to understand. But it happens . . . it happens when people

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are . . . old. He'd had a heart attack, or at least that's what . . . well, that's what the paper says. Apparently he didn't take very good care of himself. Here." She put out her hand and in it was a note card with a thin, wobbly handwriting on it. "But this is better news. This is from Mrs. Bright. It was sent to thank us for remembering her in the hospital. She's also written you a little message. She wants to know if you'd like to come over to her house after she comes home. She writes that she has lots of seed catalogues to look through. For her garden in the spring. But you must realize that she wrote this before Mr. Bright passed away. She may want some time alone . . . when she comes home."

Kendra's bright, dark eyes glanced from the card, back up to her aunt.

"According to the note, she'll be coming home soon. She's doing much better. She was very ill, Kendra. She's very lucky to have survived. She had pneumonia, and that's a very serious disease . . . when one is old. She says here . . ." She fondled the card uneasily; Kendra hadn't so much as blinked during all of this. ". . . that a cousin will be coming to stay with her to help her . . . and Mr. Bright, but now . . ." Milly stared down at the child, her mind buzzing and turning as she did. Too much like my mother, she was thinking. So intense, so single-minded. "So, you see, dear, when Mrs. Bright does come home, we must be very . . ."

"He didn't kill her," Kendra said softly, but without surprise, without emotion.

"Oh no, of course not!" Edna cried from across the table.

"We told you the idea was foolish," Lily said, retreating quickly to the winning side, but feeling cowardly for doing so.

Kendra nodded, then turned and marched resolutely out of the room without another word.

For two days Kendra didn't read. She went to school. She ate her meals and took her baths. She did all the things which were expected of her, but she didn't read. She simply sat and looked at a place on the floor in her room. She just sat and stared and stared and when Lily asked her what she was doing (Lily was the only one who thought to even check, to see what the child was up to if not turning pages in her room) she received this terse answer:

"I'm thinking."

And when Lily asked the following day: "Aren't you . . . going to read . . . or . . ." Kendra didn't even raise her dark eyes to look at her aunt as she answered: "I'm not done thinking yet."

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Fortunately for her, Kendra Patterson didn't have to think for very long. As if in answer to her thoughts, or whatever questions and doubts were tumbling through her head, an unexpected caller showed up at the Pattersons' door the following day, four days after Mr. Bright's "untimely death."

Unexpected caller, yes. A rather large man dressed in a dark suit, whom Kendra heard introduce himself as a detective sergeant for the local police force, temporarily "attached to the district attorney's office" to do this "type of thing."

"We were asked to look into the circumstances of the death of Mr. Edward Bright, your neighbor."

Kendra remained just out of sight in the doorway to the dining room where the large man sat with her three aunts. He was helping himself to coffee, cookies, and a slice of the chocolate cake Edna had just taken from the oven. "Thank you, ladies, quite friendly of you . . ."

"The circumstances, you say, Officer—Sergeant . . ." Edna murmured solicitously.

"Edna, you mustn't appear too . . . eager," Milly corrected her sister. "Because we aren't that way, Sergeant, we're not your typical nosy old women, if that's what you expect. We mind our own business and expect others to do the same."

"Oh, my sister's correct, absolutely," Edna was quick to concur. "We like to consider ourselves respectful neighbors." She looked at her sister for agreement, received a little nod, and added: "Even considerate. We never pry."

"Well, unfortunately, I was hoping for a little of that . . . nosiness," the man commented drily. "I expect I read too many mysteries." He coughed, wiped his mouth, and accepted another slice of Edna's cake.

"Because you see, ladies, it appears that your neighbor, Mr. Bright, may have had some secret he wasn't too proud of, something that, well, this is difficult for me to say, might involve one of you." There, it was said, and he sat back, waiting, watching their collective reactions around the table.

From the eldest, Milly Patterson, a surprised grimace, a hand raising to a pale and wrinkled throat. From the next, her sister Edna, who was practically a carbon copy of Milly Patterson, though just a bit on the smaller, slighter side, came the very same reaction, with an additional little, "Oh my."

And from the youngest, who the sergeant was starting to think wasn't bad-looking for a woman in her forties, a nervous: "What-

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ever are you talking about? We know nothing . . . nothing about Mr. Bright!"

That's when Detective Sergeant Henderson removed from his hip pocket—shifting his ponderous weight as he did—a small notebook and flipped it open. "According to the EMTs who attended Mr. Bright four nights ago, he said a few . . . peculiar things. But that happens, dying people do sometimes say peculiar things, they ramble, and a lot of times nothing they say has any rhyme or reason. However, the people on duty that night felt it important they report what he said to my office."

Again he was greeted by three surprised and now slightly alarmed expressions. He waited a moment and then went on:

"Apparently Bright claimed, and now I'm reading, ladies: 'She knows. How could she know? But she does. I see her face every night from across the street. She knows.' " The sergeant slapped the book shut and studied them all one more time. " 'Course, it could be the confused ramblings of a dying man. But the EMTs, two of them, reliable young men I know personally, said Bright emphasized the word 'she.' And they clearly heard him say 'from across the street.'"

"Well, certainly, Officer—Sergeant," Milly took the lead, "you aren't placing any credence on the words of a dying man? He could have meant anything—or anyone."

Again, the man waited for a suitable time to pass and then he flipped the notebook open again. He'd wanted them to think that was all there was. But it wasn't.

" 'She knows I plan to kill Ellie. I know she does. She watches me all the time and I'm sorry for it. I'm sorry for it.' " The sergeant raised his eyes to the three women, looked back at his notebook. "Then he mumbled something the EMTs couldn't make out, coughed, gagged, and was dead. This was his second heart attack, you know. He'd had a smaller attack earlier in the evening, called his doctor, then as the pain started to return and get worse, he called the ambulance. It was a wonder he hung on as long as he did. Massive attack. The second one, that is."

"Oh, this is horrible, so horrible!" Edna exclaimed. "He meant he was going to . . ."

"Confession of a dying man," the sergeant agreed, nodding. "So you see, ladies, according to Bright, one of you knew what he was planning to do. Any of you have anything further you'd like to shed . . ." He reached for his coffee cup and raised it to his mouth. ". . . light on for me?"

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"I am horrified, absolutely horrified, as well as indignant, Sergeant, that you'd think that we . . . well, if we had knowledge of a crime about to be committed, certainly we'd have gone to the police!" Milly had finally recovered.

"Oh, we certainly would have!" Edna concurred.

But Lily was silent, and turning slowly in her chair she noticed the small, dark figure standing in the doorway.

"So none of you," he gave the three women a slow, cool look, "have any idea what Bright might have been referring to?"

"As you said, Officer," Milly said brusquely, "the ramblings of a dying man. Thank God. Thank God."

"Thank God?" he turned to the eldest woman.

"That he didn't have the opportunity to do what he . . . what he claims he was going to!" Milly Patterson explained. "Poor Mrs. Bright, first having to deal with the loss of her husband . . . and now this?"

"I suppose you've got a point there," he said, shifting his weight and shoving the notebook back into his pocket.

"*And if he did die of natural causes,*" *Milly continued,* "*then I* fail to see how we can be of any further assistance to you."

"Yeah, guess you're right. Guy just had a guilty conscience, maybe," he agreed with some reluctance.

That's when he felt, rather than saw, the small, dark-eyed figure standing just behind him. She had taken a cautious step into the room as he turned around and for a moment he wondered who she was, and how much she had heard standing there.

Probably not very much. Probably just came into the room.

"Well, hello there, sweetie," he said, then he turned back to the three women. "You ladies are probably right. This was just a follow-up, a formality, you might say. We need to check everything out."

"Of course you do," Milly agreed stiffly, suddenly eager for him to leave and take his suspicions with him.

"The man just had a guilty conscience." The sergeant rose slowly from his seat, nodding at them, giving an extra little smile to the scowling Lily. "Apparently he'd been on heart medication years ago but his prescription was running out. Still, it bothers me that he might have been planning his wife's murder. Yes, that's really why I'm here, not to accuse any of you ladies of any wrongdoing, but just to ask if any of you saw or sensed that anything was wrong over there? You see, we think he tried earlier. Mrs. Bright nearly died of pneumonia—she checked herself into the hospital, if you didn't know. The husband was adamant she come

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home, claimed he could take care of her himself, but her doctors wouldn't let her leave. We also found a large quantity of sleeping pills in their house. But as you said—" He was looking down at Milly Patterson now. "—thank God he died before he could carry out his plans."

"Oh, my!" Milly exclaimed softly.

"I can scarcely believe any of this," Edna added.

But Lily had turned back to her little niece and was looking down at Kendra with a new awareness and respect.

"So whatever it was that gave Mr. Bright that fatal attack"— the man reached for the tray of cookies, turned and offered one to Kendra, saying, "Here, sweetie," then turned back and finished with: "Saved Mrs. Bright. Hell of an ironic world, wouldn't you agree?"

"It certainly is," Milly Patterson said stiffly, her eyes falling on Kendra.

"Oh my, yes," Edna added, her eyes moving to Kendra, too.

"Kendra— " Lily began, as though she might have more to say.

But Kendra was walking to the door with the sergeant, cookie in one hand, book in the other. Lily Patterson just shut her mouth and watched as the man asked:

"What's that you're reading, sweetie? You like to read?"

"I'm done reading," she told him, handing him her book. "I'm going to start a garden."

"Is that so?" he asked, amused, stooping down to receive the book with a smile. "And what're you going to grow, honey?"

"I'm going to start a garden with Mrs. Bright," Kendra told him, her face grave and serious, her dark eyes determined and scowling. "We're going to look at seed catalogues when she gets home." Her eyes moved away from him and she looked at the three women sitting at the table . . .

At Milly Patterson, murmuring, "A garden?" as she remembered the years of endless television viewing, followed by the years of endless books;

And at Edna, saying, "A garden? Oh my," her thoughts quite the same as her sister's;

And then at Lily, who said with a choke in her throat: "That's a wonderful idea, dear."

"Yes, I'm going to plant a garden," Kendra said in her forthright, determined fashion as she turned her large, dark, unblinking eyes back to the sergeant. "And I'm going to plant many things."●

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Art by Darryl Elliott

The Mystery of Rochelle Marais

by O'Neil De Noux

Standing in the grass at the top of the levee, Dugas raised his left hand to shield his eyes from the strong Louisiana sun and looked down at the body at the river's edge. It was a woman in a white dress. She looked small lying next to the wide river.

"Those boys found her," said the young police officer standing next to Dugas. He pointed to two black boys sitting in a pirogue just downriver from the body. One of the boys held on to the trunk of a small pecan tree that had sprouted along the *batture,* the wild, unkempt land between the levee and the water.

"What time did they find her?" Dugas asked, pulling his notepad and pencil from his coat pocket. He began his notes with the date

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and time: Thursday. 20 March 1891. 10:00 A.M.

"I was called here at exactly nine-thirty by one of the fruit peddlers." The copper pulled his light-blue bowler helmet off and wiped his brow and pointed back at the open market behind them. "The boys found her a few minutes before that."

"What's your name?"

The young cop fanned the front of his police jacket and said, "Clavin. Alvin G. Clavin, sir."

"Forget the 'sir.' "

Louisiana native O'Neil De Noux has used his knowledge of New Orleans and of police procedure (he is a former homicide detective) to envision a turn-of-the-century New Orleans seething with new immigrants and racial tension. Many mystery buffs will recognize his title as an allusion to Poe's classic crime story "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt." ¶

Clavin nodded and said, "I can't believe how hot it is already this morning." He spoke in a nervous voice and Dugas noticed the number on his silver star-and-crescent New Orleans police badge was 93. His own badge, detective gold, bore the number 24.

Dugas turned back to the river and began to work his way down the *batture,* taking a roundabout path to the body. As he descended, the strong scents of the fruits and vegetables from the market faded, replaced by the musty smell of muddy river water. At least it was a little cooler next to the swirling brown water.

Moving carefully toward the body, Dugas looked for footprints but found none in the mud at the edge of the water or along the grassy slope of the levee. He stopped ten feet from the body and studied the scene.

The body was only six inches from the water. A paddlewheeler passed by heading upriver, its steam engine hissing, the water surging up to the dead woman's bare feet.

Dugas heard Clavin stop behind him. He looked over at the two boys in the pirogue. Shirtless, their black skin shimmering with sweat, they stared back at him with large oval eyes.

"You just stay there," he told the boys. They both nodded. The one holding on to the tree let out a worried sigh. "You're not in any trouble," Dugas said. "You just found a body. That's all."

The woman wore a light white cotton dress that reached nearly

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to her ankles and was buttoned all the way up to her neck. Her feet were together, her arms at her sides, palms up.

Dugas went down on his haunches. He felt his wet shirt press against his back. The woman's mouth was bloody, a dark red streak stained her left cheek down to her neck. There were black and blue bruises along her throat. Dugas leaned closer and saw a thin rope wrapped so tightly around her neck it was half buried in the swollen flesh.

Dugas reached over and touched her left arm. Cool and dry. He picked the arm up and bent it at the elbow. No sign of rigor mortis. He reached down and felt her wrist. He did not expect to find a pulse. She was dead, but only for a short while. There was a hint of warmth at her wrist and along the crook of her elbow.

"She float up here?" Clavin said.

"She was never in the water."

"But she's wet." The woman's dress, pressed against her body, was soiled and damp.

"She's been dead less than two hours," Dugas said as he examined the hands. Both were partially open. Carefully, he looked to see if there were any foreign objects embedded in them. He found none, but there were bruises on both hands along the palms and along the knuckles. Defensive wounds, he noted. Letting go of her right hand, he thought how small it looked.

Dugas examined the soles of her feet next. They were clean. She hadn't walked here barefoot, that was for sure. And certainly no one had carried her here along the top of the levee, not during daylight. Someone could have dropped her from a boat, but there would be footprints in the mud.

Dugas moved up to the woman's face and examined the pallid skin, the fine nose and high cheekbones, the full lips and small pointy chin, and the long dark brown hair draped around her face. Beautiful, he thought. She must have been beautiful.

Even marred with the dark stain of blood around her mouth, her face was still lovely. She looked delicate, like a porcelain doll, but her face, like the faces of all the dead Dugas had seen in his three years as a detective, was dull and waxen.

Dugas went back to the hands and looked beneath the woman's fingernails. He found nothing. A mosquito lit on his neck. He swatted it. He heard the boys in the pirogue swatting now, too.

Standing, he spotted two pieces of white cloth in the blackberry bushes near the base of the levee. He looked again for footprints

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but could see none, so he eased his way around the body to the pieces of cloth. Impaled on thorns, they appeared torn. He made note of their location, estimating the distance of each from the body before reaching into his left pants pocket for his small folding knife. He cut the branches which held the pieces of cloth and passed them to Clavin to hold.

Shielding his eyes again, he spotted another uniformed copper standing among a group of men in aprons and work clothes at the top of the levee. Dugas pulled off his coat.

"Clavin," he said, handing the coat to the copper. "Go back up there and have that officer assist you. Get the names and addresses of everyone up there. Ask them if they saw anyone up on this levee within the last few hours, especially a pretty girl in a white dress. And be careful of my coat and the branches. Please."

"Yes, sir."

"Go back the same way we came down."

Clavin nodded and retraced their footsteps back up the levee. Dugas, his notepad still in hand, moved back to the water's edge and called out to the boys.

"Bring that pirogue over here."

The boys swatted at mosquitoes, leaving stains of bright red blood on their arms. Behind them a large swarm of mosquitoes, like tiny black snowflakes, floated in the humid air. The boys could add little to the investigation, except that they had spotted the dead woman when they passed downriver, skirting along the *batture* for a good fishing spot. The boy Dugas had seen holding on to the pecan tree had climbed out and run over the levee to the market for help.

"All right," Dugas said, slipping his notebook and pencil into his back pocket. "You can go now."

The boys paddled off as quickly as they could.

Dugas swatted another mosquito on his neck and looked up as two mortuary attendants carrying a leather gurney worked their way down the levee. Both black, the men wore gray work shirts and pants. They were from Charity Hospital.

They carefully loaded the body on the gurney and covered it with a coarse cotton sheet. As they made their way back up, Dugas examined where the body had lain. Nothing except a brown spider scurrying over the flattened grass. He followed the gurney.

Clavin stood atop the levee, Dugas's coat draped over his shoulder, the two blackberry branches in his left hand. The second cop-

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per stood next to Clavin, his helmet in hand. Taller, with dark hair and muttonchops, he appeared to be about thirty.

Clavin stepped up to Dugas and said, "As soon as we started taking names, they started leaving. But we got all their names. No one saw anything."

Typical, Dugas thought. He asked the second copper his name.

"Doran. Patrick John Doran."

Dugas added the name to the list Clavin presented him.

"I'd appreciate you two keeping your ears open," he told them as he took his coat and the branches from Clavin and slipped Doran's notes into his coat pocket.

"You think these dagos gonna tell us anything?" Doran waved his hand in a wide arch indicating the entire French Quarter. Dugas leveled his gaze at the man and narrowed his left eye. Doran took a step back.

"I meant no offense," Doran said. "She was garroted, wasn't she? That's the way Moustache Pete kills."

Dugas needed no explanation of how Sicilians garroted one another. It did look like a Sicilian murder. Only the woman wasn't Sicilian. She had the delicate Creole features of Dugas's race. She looked French.

Shielding his eyes again, Dugas looked over at the dark rooftops of the French Quarter, at the black wrought-iron balconies, at the plush green of Jackson Square and the pale spires of St. Louis Cathedral. He smelled the vegetables again, sharp green bell peppers, onions, and sweet bananas.

Beyond the square, along Chartres Street, men with handlebar moustaches and olive skin, men in white shirts and black pants, walked two abreast, waving their hands as they walked and talked. These Moustache Petes—Sicilians—had turned the old French Quarter into a vast Italian slum, littered with rickety vegetable carts, sheets hanging from lace balconies, Creole cottages crumbling in disrepair, alleys filled with refuse.

Moving his gaze back to Decatur Street, Dugas spotted two men studying a black-bordered announcement tacked to a lamppost. He knew the announcement was a daily death notice. No doubt after the lynching of the Sicilians at Parish Prison last week, this was a regular ritual for Italians in New Orleans.

"Can we leave now?" Doran said.

Dugas, who had been unconsciously pulling at his own moustache, said, "Yes. If you hear anything, please send me a report."

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Both officers walked away, wiping their brows, their sky-blue bowlers in hand. Dugas turned and went down the levee to make his way through the Quarter to the morgue.

She was already on the wooden examining table when Dugas entered the morgue. A tall, thin man in a white smock stood washing his hands at the sink. Dugas recognized Dr. Leo Raylon. The doctor nodded recognition back, turned, and called out for his secretary. A short youth with black hair stumbled into the room. A notepad and pencil in hand, the youth grinned nervously and nodded. Dugas noted the stark contrast of the boy's black hair and Raylon's white-blond hair.

Raylon stepped up to the body.

Dugas took out his notepad and pencil and prepared to jot quickly as the pathologist made his examination. Raylon spoke fast and did not like to repeat himself.

"We have the body of a well-nourished white female . . ."

Dugas took rapid notes:

White Female. 20 to 25 years. 5'2" long. About 100 pounds. Brown hair. Brown eyes.

Dugas described the dress:

White cotton dress torn in three places on right side and once along the back. White slip of fine muslin ripped upward from the bottom hem to the waist and wound three times around the waist.

He noted that the woman wore no jewelry. As Raylon continued his examination, Dugas wrote an account of the wounds.

Four bruises along the right side of throat. Two on left side. Six bruises on right hand, three along knuckles and three in palm. Four bruises on left hand, two on knuckles and two in palm.

Ligature around throat was a thin cord of rope tied with a square knot.

Raylon wiped away the blood from the victim's face and lips and found no injury there or inside the mouth. Dugas figured the blood must have come up the throat.

Stepping out of Raylon's way as the doctor circled the body, Dugas watched the doctor and his assistant roll her over and open the back of her dress. Raylon instructed the assistant to note the absence of postmortem lividity and continued his examination.

Carefully, Dugas removed the two strips of cloth from the thorny

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branches and handed them to Raylon, who found where they had been torn from the right side of the dress.

Raylon concluded his examination with, "The cause of death is strangulation. The manner of death is homicide. What time was she found?"

"Around nine-thirty."

Nodding, Raylon concluded, "She was killed between seven and nine o'clock this morning." Leveling a stern look at Dugas, he said, "She was garroted." He drew an index finger across his throat. "Damn dagos."

A loud knock on the door startled both men. The assistant answered, turned back to them, and said, "Someone's here about the body."

An elderly woman with a shawl wrapped around her head sat in a straight-back chair in the coroner's office. A smallish young man stood next to her, his hand on her left shoulder.

Dugas opened his jacket to show his badge pinned to his belt.

"Monsieur," the man said, his lower lip quivering.

"Yes?"

"Monsieur. Is it true?" The man spoke in flowery French. "Was a young woman found on the levee? A woman in a white dress?"

"English, please."

"Monsieur?"

"Use English, please. And yes, the body of a young woman was found on the levee this morning."

The man put his hands up to his mouth and struggled to keep his composure. "Monsieur, what did this woman look like?"

Dugas watched the man's blue eyes as he described the victim. The man flinched with each detail of the description, his eyes rolled back, and he slumped to the side and would have fallen had Dugas not caught him.

"Is this the house?" Dugas asked the young man as their cab pulled to a stop at the end of Spain Street near the levee. In front of them was an old Spanish house that had recently been whitewashed.

The young man looked out and said, "Yes."

Dugas helped the old woman slowly out of the carriage and passed her to the young man, who guided her toward the house. Dugas paid the cabbie and looked at the levee, half hidden behind a row of tall magnolia trees. He turned back to the house. Like many homes built at the beginning of the century, it had a steep

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pitched roof, and was constructed of brick laid between heavy cypress posts and then plastered over.

Dugas stepped up out of the street onto the banquette and followed the two through the open French doors into the house. They passed through clean and simple front rooms to the kitchen in back, where the old woman sat at the table while the young man threw open the windows and opened the back door.

Dugas waited until the young man sat down.

"Sir, I need to ask you some questions."

"Oui," the man said faintly. His eyes were still glassy.

The room smelled of freshly peeled potatoes. A bowl of okra sat on the counter. The incessant beat of a blacksmith striking iron echoed through the window. Dugas pulled out his pad and pencil and said, "What is your name, sir?"

"I am Louis Esteban. This is the widow Marais." Dugas knew the old woman's name from the information she had provided the coroner. "It is her daughter that lies in your morgue," Esteban added, as if Dugas did not know. "I live next door."

Dugas looked carefully at Esteban as he asked his next question. "From whom did you hear about the woman found on the levee?"

"What?"

"Who told you a girl was found on the levee?"

At an even six feet, Dugas stood a half-foot taller than Esteban, and looked down into the man's blue eyes even from across the room. Esteban had a thin moustache and thin lips.

Esteban rose, putting his hands on the back of the old woman's chair, and said, "Madame Marais' daughter did not arrive at work this morning. Her employer sent a messenger. You see, Rochelle has never been late for work."

"The messenger told you about the woman found on the levee?"

"Oui. He'd heard of it on his way here."

Madame Marais covered her craggy face with her hands and leaned forward in the chair.

"Where did Rochelle Marais work?" Dugas asked.

Through trembling lips, Esteban explained that Rochelle worked at the gallery of Stephen Adams at the corner of Canal and St. Charles Avenue. She worked from nine o'clock in the morning until six o'clock in the evening. Except Sundays.

"What type of gallery is it?" Dugas asked.

"An art gallery. Art and photography."

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Dugas ran his right hand over his moustache. "Is this Stephen Adams an artist or a dealer?"

"Photographer," Esteban said, with a sour look on his face.

"What did Rochelle do at the gallery?"

"She kept the books. She is very good with numbers. She keeps the books for the blacksmith's work my brother and I do also."

Dugas jotted quickly, then asked, "What time did Rochelle leave for work this morning?"

"Half-past seven," Madame Marais said. Sitting up straighter now, the woman stared past Dugas. "She told me goodbye from where you are standing, Monsieur L'Police. Then she left."

Esteban leaned against the kitchen counter, his hands in fists now.

"Did she walk to work?"

"Yes. During good weather she would walk. She liked to walk." Madame Marais' voice was faint. She'd told the coroner she was sixty and Dugas could believe it; she had slumped shoulders and rough hands and tired eyes so dark they looked nearly black.

"Which route did she take?"

"To Elysian Fields and up Royal," the old woman whispered.

"Did she ever walk the levee?"

Madame Marais nodded and covered her eyes with her handkerchief, but did not cry. "Sometimes," she said, "she would walk the levee to Canal."

Dugas felt perspiration working down the sides of his temples. He continued his questions, learning that Rochelle had no boyfriends, that her nocturnal activities were limited to sitting out on the front stoop and visiting with the neighbors; that she was a quiet, religious girl.

He asked to see her things and Esteban led him back through the house to the room Rochelle had shared with her mother. Rochelle Anne Marais had lived twenty-one years. In her closet Dugas found two hats, six dresses, one pair of dress shoes, two dozen books—romances mostly—and a broken pair of roller skates. In her chest of drawers he found a hand mirror, assorted toiletries, combs, and brushes. Strands of her long brown hair still clung to the brushes.

Across the room, on her mother's chest of drawers, was a portrait of Rochelle in an oval frame. Dugas picked it up and turned it over. Stenciled on the back was the name: Stephen Adams Gallery, New Orleans.

Dugas found himself staring at the portrait, at Rochelle's dark eyes and fine cheeks, at her full lips and the curve of her long neck. She was truly beautiful. He put the photo back.

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Esteban stood in the far corner of the room. He was completely motionless until Dugas asked him to step outside. Dugas could hear the sharp clang of metal striking metal more clearly in the open air. It came from the alley behind him, the alley next to the Marais house.

Dugas wiped the sweat from his brow. "Is that your house?" he asked, pointing next door.

Esteban nodded. His hands were in fists again, his chest rising and falling steadily. "I tell you," Esteban said. "You must catch the Sicilian bastard that did this."

Dugas narrowed his eyes.

"You saw the way she was strangled," Esteban said.

"What did you do this morning?" Dugas asked.

Esteban's mouth opened.

"This morning," Dugas said. "What did you do?"

Esteban looked at his feet and explained in a pained voice how he had taken the streetcar up to City Park before seven. There was supposed to be a horse auction at Dueling Oaks, but when he arrived there was no auction, so he came right back. No. No one saw him, except for the streetcar drivers, and he saw no one he knew.

"Monsieur, do you doubt my word?" he asked.

Dugas shook his head as he wrote in his notes. He was about to answer when he felt something move behind him. He turned quickly to see a pair of massive arms and the wide chest of a man wearing a leather apron. Towering above him was a face contorted in pain.

"Louis," the huge man cried as he opened his arms and wrapped them around Esteban. He pressed his face against Esteban's neck and cried. Esteban raised a small hand and patted the big man's shoulder.

"Go ahead and cry," Esteban said. Turning to Dugas, he added, "This is my brother Juan." His brother's sobs caused Esteban to nearly bounce on his toes. Dugas noticed that the sound of clanging metal no longer echoed down the alley between the houses.

Dugas waited until the man stopped sobbing and pulled away from his brother. Esteban took Juan's huge hands in his and explained that Dugas was a policeman and was asking questions.

"Police?" the big man said in the high-pitched voice of a child. Dugas could see in the deep-set eyes that he had the mind of a child.

Dugas pulled out his notepad. "Monsieur," he said to Juan. "Where have you been this morning?"

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Esteban raised a hand to protest. "As you can see, my brother is slow."

Juan wrung his huge hands and said, "I been working." He pointed down the alley between the houses.

Esteban grabbed his brother's hands and said slowly, "Did you leave the shop today?"

Juan shook his head.

Dugas spotted a movement in the doorway. Madame Marais stuck her tortured face out and said, "Did you find Rochelle's necklace?"

"What?"

"Her silver locket. She always wore it."

Crossing the neutral ground to the American side of Canal Street, Dugas hurried around a mule-drawn streetcar, careful not to slip on the slick rails. He looked up as a swarm of pigeons fluttered away from the bronze statue of Henry Clay towering above the intersection of Canal and St. Charles Avenue. He jumped the gutter and crossed the street's Belgian-block pavement to a brown brick building with a striped awning.

As he stepped into the Stephen Adams Gallery, he felt a flutter in his belly. Crossing the neutral ground from the Creole section of the city into the American section did that to him sometimes.

A robust man with muttonchops stepped out from behind a counter, tugging at the vest of a pinstriped suit. "And what can I do for you today?" He had wide-set milky eyes and a red drinker's nose. It didn't take long to anger him. Stephen Adams had no problem talking about how he'd last seen Rochelle Marais the previous evening leaving the gallery, but balked as soon as Dugas asked what he had done that morning.

"I want to talk to an American detective," Adams said.

Dugas reached forward and poked an index finger against the man's belly. "I *am* an American detective! You want me to drag you all the way to the Central Police Station to prove it?"

Adams huffed and complained, but finally put his hands up and explained that he always had breakfast next door at Von Effinger's Restaurant, dining with the owner from seven until a quarter till nine, a fact that may have partially explained the man's girth.

"I'd like to speak with the messenger you sent to the Marais house."

Adams puffed out his chest as if this was a major inconvenience but called to the back of the gallery, "André, can you come out?"

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"One minute," a voice called back.

"He's in the darkroom," Adams explained, moving around Dugas to help a woman who'd just entered the gallery.

A minute later, a small light-skinned black came out of the back wiping his hands on a yellow-stained white towel. Smiling, he introduced himself as André Pavee. He smelled of acidic chemicals from the darkroom.

Dugas was specific in his questions. "Exactly what did you say to Madame Marais?"

"I asked if Rochelle was ill. She said no. I told her Rochelle had not arrived for work. She told me Rochelle had left for the gallery as usual. I asked her to sit down and questioned her about what Rochelle wore to work that morning. She told me a white dress. Then I told her about the young woman the police had found on the levee. She turned pale. There was a young man there, a neighbor who told me to fetch a cab. He came right out with her and they went off into the Quarter."

Obviously well educated, André was open and friendly.

"How did you hear about the dead woman on the levee?"

"A cop stopped me on Esplanade and asked me my business. He told me about it."

The smile faded as Pavee said, "Sir, that was not Rochelle on the levee, was it?"

Dugas nodded.

The blood drained from the young man's face.

Dugas asked him what he had done that morning. André said he had arrived at work at seven and began processing the film from the previous afternoon's work. "I live in Treme," he said, "on Derbigny Street."

Dugas thanked him and waited until Adams was finished with his customer before confirming with the proprietor that André had come in early and had developed two sets of film before nine A.M. Before leaving, Dugas asked Adams, "Do you have another print of the portrait of Rochelle?"

Adams dug a five-by-seven-inch print out of a file and seemed happy with that to be rid of the detective.

Next door, at Von Effinger's, Dugas interviewed the owner briefly, confirming Adams's alibi. He verified with the heavyset waiter named Alexi, who knew Adams well, that he had served the man and his boss that morning.

Dugas recrossed the neutral ground back into the Creole section

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of town, back through the Quarter toward the open-air market on Decatur Street. Strong scents of garlic and tomato sauce wafted over him as he walked down Royal Street. Women called out to one another in Italian. Children in striped shirts and shorts kicked a football in the street, using a lace balcony as a goal. He saw men watching him from behind cracked windows, peeking at him from behind half-opened louvered doors of houses built by Spaniards and Frenchmen a hundred years ago.

Pausing to pick up the afternoon's edition of the French newspaper *L'Abeille* from a young Creole street urchin, Dugas crossed beneath the black lace balcony of the old red brick Pontalba House. He stepped into Cafe Michelle for a croissant and a steamy cup of coffee and chicory.

Breaking up the croissant and sipping the strong coffee, Dugas read an article entitled "Assassination on the Levee." The article was accurate in its reporting of how the body was discovered on the *batture*. Dugas was relieved to see it did not mention that the woman was barefoot, nor did it elaborate as to the bruises or the torn dress. Instead, it hastened to point out that the young girl was garroted in a "Sicilian manner." It also went into painstaking detail as to the victim's innocence and the suffering of her widowed mother. Bent on exciting the public, the story elaborated on the atrocity of the murder and the youth and beauty of the victim.

Just as Dugas pulled the portrait of Rochelle Marais from his coat pocket, he heard someone say, "You missed the party at Tom Anderson's."

Dugas looked up as Detective Patrick Shannon crossed over to his table. Grinning, Shannon removed his black derby and wiped his brow. "You know you was invited even if you ain't Irish."

"I know," Dugas said, tucking the photo back into his pocket.

At six feet, Shannon stood exactly as tall as Dugas but was much heavier. He sported a handlebar moustache a shade darker than his red hair, and wore a brown pinstriped suit with his derby. He pulled up a chair and waved the waiter over and ordered coffee.

Dugas had worked with Shannon before, on the series of murders along Frenchmen Street and other cases.

Shannon picked up the newspaper and pointed to the headline. "I heard. That's why I'm here. Maybe you could use some help?"

Dugas smiled at his friend. He'd known about the party in Storyville. It was to celebrate the hanging of the murderers at Parish Prison last week. Sicilians, these were the men who had

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killed Chief of Police David Hennessy one rainy night the previous October, the very same night Dugas concluded his investigation into the murders on Frenchmen Street. It seemed so long ago.

"Garroted?" Shannon said, putting the paper down.

Dugas nodded.

"But *pisanos* don't kill women."

"I know," Dugas said, leaning back in his chair. "Not every killing is a vendetta."

Shannon sat back and nodded. "But she was found here in the Quarter, right?"

Dugas nodded again.

Shannon shrugged. "I been working Vendetta Alley too long."

Dugas had worked the alley too, that stretch of Decatur Street between Dumaine and St. Philip, only a few blocks from where the girl was found along the *batture*. Branded with the black hand of the new American Mafia, Vendetta Alley was the most dangerous area in a city full of dangers. Lace balconies and quaint cottages surrounding tree-filled patios might make a city look charming, but in America, wherever there were people, there was danger.

"We have to go with the facts, my friend," Dugas said.

"What are they?"

Dugas laid out everything he knew for his friend.

"That's not much to go on," Shannon said when he had finished.

"It's a start." Dugas stood and picked up his paper. "You can help me canvass."

"I knew you was gonna say that."

"What's the matter?" Dugas reached over and tapped Shannon's belly. "You can work off Tom Anderson's beer."

Walking down St. Ann Street, Dugas noticed the long shadows across Jackson Square. They crossed Decatur to the long black roof and round columns and tan masonry walls of the open-air market.

They soon discovered that the morning crews had left the market; they would find no witnesses. Climbing the levee, Dugas pointed down to the spot where Rochelle was found.

Shannon rubbed his chin. "I'll canvass the Toulouse Street Wharf and you canvass Governor Nicholls," the big Irishman said. "We'll meet there, okay?"

Dugas stopped beneath the gas lamp at the corner of Dauphine and Mandeville Street and flagged down a praline cart. The old black woman stopped her mule, pushed her striped bandanna

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back on her forehead, and sang out, "I got praline. I got taffy. I got rock candy."

Dugas bought a half-dozen pralines and watched the woman's ancient, wrinkled hands wrap each in waxed paper before tying a string about the bundle.

"Thank you, sir," the old woman said, tapping her mule on the rump to move the small red cart on its way.

Dugas could feel the warmth of the sugar-pecan candy as he carried the package up Mandeville to his aunt's Creole cottage. He stopped in front of the cottage and turned to his right. Not six city blocks away, an old woman sat in her kitchen mourning the death of a girl whom everyone said was truly beautiful.

Dugas thought of the man he'd found at the Governor Nicholls Street wharf who had said, "Was it that pretty girl who walks the levee in the morning? The girl with the long brown hair?"

"Yes," Dugas replied. "Did you see her this morning?"

"No. But she was . . . an angel." The man had skin so black it looked blue beneath the gaslight of the wharf. He cowered at his brazen statement. After all, she was a white woman. Most blacks, if they approached a white woman, still averted their gaze and moved aside.

Turning back to his house, Dugas reminded himself to put in his notes that Shannon had found nothing of value at the Toulouse Street wharf. He smelled his aunt's red beans as soon as he entered the house. He found her in the kitchen stirring the pot.

Aunt Lillian smiled at him and said in French, "Wash your hands, li'l boy."

Dugas put the pralines on the counter next to the stove.

"For you," he said.

"And you," Lillian smiled.

Dugas draped his coat around a kitchen chair, rolled up the sleeves of his dress-whites shirt, and scrubbed up in the kitchen sink. He watched his aunt drop breaded pork chops into a pan of sizzling grease.

"How did you know when I'd be home?"

"Never mind." Lillian pointed her chin toward Dugas's bedroom. "I found the child sleeping out next to the stoop again. He's on the cot."

Dugas slipped into his bedroom and stood over the small bed in the corner. The boy's name was Boo, and he was small for ten. A nappy-headed black street urchin, he had been found by Dugas on Frenchmen Street last year. Reaching over, Dugas untied Boo's

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shoes, the only shoes the boy had ever owned, shoes Dugas bought for him last Christmas.

"You better wake him," Lillian said from the kitchen. "I tried to get him to eat, but he wanted to wait until you came home."

Dugas grabbed Boo's right leg and shook it. He shook it again, and the boy sat up and rubbed his eyes. A gap-toothed grin came across his dark face.

"Come on," Dugas said, grabbing the boy's hand. "Let's eat."

Boo ate two chops and a plate full of beans and rice. Dugas put two chops away too, along with his heaping plate of beans and rice.

"You were busy today?" Boo asked.

"Very," Dugas said. "How's your mom and 'em?"

"They all right."

Boo had two younger sisters and an older brother who lived with their mother in a Bywater shanty. Boo bounced back and forth between his mother's and Dugas's house. Dugas had told Boo he could stay with him as much as he wanted, but he didn't want to take the boy away from his mother.

Dugas watched Boo's small hands grip the spoon as he ate. Boo smiled a bean-filled smile back at him, his deep brown eyes glistening with excitement.

"I got you something," Dugas said when his aunt removed their plates. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a brown leather belt.

"Come here," he said.

He untied the rope that held up the boy's pants and fastened the belt around Boo's narrow waist. Boo ran his hands over the fine cowhide, looked up in amazement, and said, "I never had a belk before."

"It's called a belt," Dugas said.

"Oh."

Boo wrapped his arms around Dugas's neck and squeezed hard.

By gas lamp later that evening, Dugas went over his notes. Sleepy-eyed Boo was back on the cot, curled up in a fetal position, his new 'belk' in his hand. Dugas turned back to his notes and studied them, studied the notes the coppers Clavin and Doran had made.

Something bothered him. Something about Esteban. Dugas leaned back and closed his eyes and replayed everything from when he first saw Esteban until he left the man and his brother. He felt his heartbeat rising. He opened his eyes and jotted a note next to Esteban's name and smiled to himself.

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Dugas pulled the portrait of Rochelle Marais from his notes and propped it up on his desk beneath the lamp. The yellow light streamed over the portrait, over the fine gray tones of her neck, over the pale tones of her face, over the nearly black tones of her wide eyes and her full lips that looked thick and black beneath the photographer's light. Dugas knew photography well enough to know that red looked black on film. It was then he noticed the locket around her neck. It was heart-shaped and small, suspended from Rochelle's neck by a thin silver chain.

He wondered if he'd ever seen her, if he'd ever passed her on the street, if he'd ever looked over at her and felt his heart rise, as it surely would have.

He looked back at the picture. No. If he'd ever seen her, he would have remembered.

Dugas stopped at a street vendor on Esplanade and passed the old man six and a quarter cents, a picayune for a copy of the morning *Picayune*. The story was on the front page. Less emotional than the *L'Abeille* story, the *Picayune's* story laid out the facts in sharp Yankee English. "The case is still a mystery," the reporter concluded. Dugas agreed as he slipped the paper under his arm and continued to the Governor Nicholls Street wharf. He immediately found a burly Sicilian who saw Rochelle nearly every morning, who had in fact seen her the previous morning walking alone along the levee. Three of the blacks in his crew had seen her too.

"It must have been around eight," the Sicilian said. "She wore a white dress and her hair was down over her shoulders." The blacks agreed, as did their foreman, who was more interested in getting his men back to work. Dugas thanked them and left.

An hour later Dugas tried to hide his excitement when told that a man was missing from work at the open market just across the levee from where Rochelle was found. "His name is Dino Caprese," said the owner of the market stall, Marcel Bouillet.

Dugas tried to keep his eyes from revealing that he knew that name. It was on the list compiled by Clavin of the men atop the levee yesterday morning.

"Come over here." Bouillet waved a black worker over. In a stained white apron, skinny Bouillet pointed a menacing finger at the man and told him to cooperate with the detective.

The worker's name was Louie Strong. He'd worked for Bouillet for two years. Averting his gaze from Dugas, he said, "Dino go over

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to watch the girl pass every morning. I tease him. Tell him he has a girlfriend. But he never talk to her. He just look at her. She has long brown hair."

"Did he go look at her yesterday?"

Strong nodded. "We both did. We walk to the levee and watch her go by."

"Was she alone?"

"She always alone. She never look back. She look like she in a dream."

"What was she wearing?" Dugas asked.

"White dress."

"You saw her walk all the way past?"

"No. Mister Marcel yell at us and we go back to work."

"Yeah," Bouillet confirmed from behind his stall. "I called them back to work."

"What time was that?"

Bouillet shrugged. "In the morning."

"I'll need Caprese's address."

Dugas found a large copper named Buck on patrol on Royal Street and took him along up St. Philip to the shotgun double where Dino Caprese lived with his mother and four sisters. They searched both sides of the double, rousting two dozen Sicilians who were waving arms and talking angrily.

Dino Caprese's mother, a rotund woman with steel-gray hair, was in tears. It took a half-hour to explain to her that nothing had happened to her son, that the police were looking for him.

"He go," Mama Caprese said, holding her apron up to her mouth. *"Ieri. Ieri."*

Dugas explained to his Irish companion that she meant yesterday.

A sister showed Dugas an empty drawer. Pointing to it, she said it was Dino's *vestiti*—clothes.

"Which way did he go?" Buck asked a group of unresponsive, angry faces that leered back at him with sheer hatred.

Dugas tapped him on the shoulder and led him out to the street, where two dozen moustachioed men had assembled along the stoops and banquette across St. Philip.

A tall Sicilian carving cheese from a block he held in his left hand raised the butcher knife in his right hand and moved it diagonally in front of his throat. Dugas met his stare before walking off.

Stepping into the street, Buck called back:

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"Hey, Joe, who killa' da' chief, Joe? Who killa' da' chief?"

Mixing Irish and Sicilians, Dugas thought, was like trying to put out a fire with oil.

Dugas crossed South Basin Street at Common and stepped up to the Central Police Station just as two coppers climbed on bicycles and pedaled away. Watching them, he remembered his years of foot patrol in the Faubourg Marigny, of simmering days that burned the soles of his feet, of midnight watches that went on forever.

In the station house, Dugas had to walk around an ugly American complaining loudly how he'd been pickpocketed by a Storyville whore.

"What didja' expect?" the Irish desk sergeant said. "It's a red-light district."

Dugas went upstairs to the Detective Bureau and all the way to his desk at the back of the squad room. He draped his coat over his straight-back chair, threw open the windows at the corner of the building, and sat at the beat-up wooden desk he shared with Shannon and two other dicks.

He had just started his bulletin on Dino Caprese when he spotted the chief of detectives, Captain James Gray, heading his way. Six feet tall and balding, Gray sported a full beard and moustache dotted with gray. He wore a black suit and high-collared shirt, but had removed his tie.

Nodding as he arrived at the desk, Gray said, "I heard you solved your case." He pulled a cigar out of his top pocket, struck a match on the desk top, and lit it.

"No, Captain," Dugas said. "It's isn't solved."

"No?" Gray pulled up a chair, put his hands behind his head, and said, "Tell me about it."

Dugas told him about the body on the *batture*, about the post-mortem exam, about the widow Marais, and then about the missing Sicilian who happened to work at the market and who happened to be up on the levee when the body was being recovered.

"What's this dago's name?"

"Dino Caprese. He's about twenty years old."

Gray shook his head. "Name don't ring a bell. He ain't one of Matranga's boys. Or Macheca's or even one of Provenzano's. Whoever he is, he ain't connected. Unless he just got to town."

"He's lived here a year."

"Then he's not Mafia. We woulda heard of him."

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Dugas crossed his arms and said, "I don't have enough for a warrant. I'm putting out a bulletin to hold him for questioning."

Gray nodded his approval.

"I don't have enough on him."

Gray winked at Dugas. "You know what I told you about coincidences."

Dugas nodded. "A detective doesn't believe in coincidences."

"Yeah, you're right. He worked next to the crime scene. He was up on the levee when you found the body, and he beat feet. Put out a bulletin."

Gray sucked in a deep drag of smoke and let it out slowly, flicking the ash on the floor.

"Good thing you didn't kill anybody this morning," he said. "The Italian government's demanding reparations because we lynched . . . I mean hanged . . . those murdering Sicilians last week. Damn, the world keeps getting stranger all the time. Can you imagine reparations for murderers? Give me the good ole days."

Dugas picked up his pencil to finish off the bulletin, instructing all officers to pick up Dino Caprese for questioning.

Gray was staring at the ceiling now. He took another drag, let it out, and said, "Did you see those preachers that came in here day before yesterday?"

"Yes, sir." How could he miss twenty men with top hats and stone faces.

"They're trying to close Storyville down. Can you imagine that?" Gray leaned back and kicked his legs up on the desk.

Dugas finished the bulletin and reread it for mistakes.

"What the hell are we gonna do with all those whores?" Gray said.

Dugas smiled at his captain and just shrugged.

"I mean, where are we gonna put 'em? Not to mention the madams and the Negro piano players. All we need around here are more unemployed Negroes."

Dugas wanted to get out of there badly.

Gray leaned forward and said, "You heard of the Temperance League, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Marching around with them banners trying to take away our whiskey." Gray looked out the open window behind Dugas and said, "Could you imagine a country with no liquor and no whores?" Gray shivered on purpose. "It's un-American."

"Never happen," Dugas said. "This is a free country."

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"His name is Dino Caprese," Dugas explained to a blank-faced Madame Marais. Louis Esteban stood behind the old woman, his hands on the back of her chair as the afternoon sun streamed into the kitchen of the house where Rochelle grew up. "He worked in the market next to the levee."

"I knew it," Esteban said, pounding a fist on the chair. He wore a leather apron today, as his brother had the previous day. "Damn dago!"

"He is just a suspect," Dugas said. "We have put a bulletin out for him, but we have no proof he murdered Rochelle."

"I knew it," Esteban repeated as he stepped away and slammed his hand on the kitchen counter. Madame Marais didn't even blink. She just stared straight ahead.

Dugas eased back a step to allow the women in the living room to make their way to Madame Marais. Her sisters, they began to weep as they encircled her.

Esteban stormed out the back door. Dugas could see him through the open window as he walked into his house. Easing around the weeping women, Dugas leaned closer to the window. He saw Esteban pull out a shotgun and start to load it.

Dugas went out the back door and approached the Esteban house. Nearly identical to the Marais house except for its blacksmith shop in the backyard, it also had been whitewashed recently. Dugas noticed the kiln was lit, but Juan was not there.

The back door was open. Dugas stepped up on the stoop and called out to Esteban. A moment later, Esteban was in the doorway, his face now streaked with tears, the shotgun hanging down in his left hand.

Slowly Dugas reached over and grabbed the barrel of the gun. Esteban resisted a moment, then let go. Dugas followed him back into the house and unloaded the shotgun, slipping the shells into his coat pocket. He laid the gun on the kitchen table.

Esteban walked through his kitchen into the next room. Dugas followed. He was about to speak when he saw the portrait of Rochelle Marais on the man's chest of drawers. It was the same portrait Dugas had taken from Rochelle's employer, only larger and framed in a silver frame.

Dugas moved over and picked it up and watched Esteban in the mirror atop the chest of drawers. He had taken a seat on the bed, his face buried in his hands. When Esteban pulled his hands away,

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he spotted Dugas with the picture and his eyes widened.

"Put that back!"

Dugas took his time putting the portrait down. "How did you get this?" he asked.

Esteban stepped over and rearranged the portrait.

As soon as he let it go, Dugas scooped it up again. Esteban glared at him, his lower lip quivering, his hands in fists again.

"Did she give this to you?"

He could see it in Esteban's eyes. No. She did not give it to him.

"You bought it from Adams."

Esteban snatched the portrait from Dugas's hands and moved back to his bed. He stared at the picture, his chest rising and falling.

There was a knock at the front door. Dugas answered it and let Shannon in. The big Irishman wore a dark green suit and carried a tan bowler in his left hand.

"I've been looking for ya' all day," Shannon said, wiping his brow with a handkerchief. He stuffed it into his back pocket. "I've been two steps behind ya' all day."

Dugas nodded to Esteban, who didn't look up. He traced the fingers of his right hand over Rochelle's face again and again. A tear fell on the glass. Esteban wiped it away.

"I wonder what were her last thoughts," Dugas said. "I wonder what she felt as she fought him off, as she struggled with him." Dugas moved closer. "There were fresh bruises on her hands. She must have struck him, tried to defend herself."

Turning to Shannon he waved the big lug over and whispered in his ear, "Take a look around."

Esteban had his eyes closed now.

Dugas continued, "I wonder what she thought when he wrapped the rope around her throat?"

Dugas sat on the bed next to Esteban.

"She gasped for air. Her lungs ached. Blood bubbled up her throat."

"Enough!" Esteban jumped up, dropping the portrait. The glass broke. Kneeling, he picked it up gingerly.

"I wonder what her skin felt like," Dugas said. "I wonder if he touched her softly before she died, if he ran his hands over her arms and felt the softness of her skin."

Esteban leaned back on his haunches and cried.

"She was beautiful," Dugas said.

He saw Shannon's legs move next to Esteban. He looked up as Shannon dangled a silver chain with a silver

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heart-shaped locket in front of Esteban's face.

Esteban fell back, his mouth open. Slowly he reached for the locket, but Shannon snatched it away and said, "Why don't you just tell us? You'll feel better."

Dugas shook his head, then leaned over and touched Esteban on the shoulder. "Where did you find the locket?" he asked his partner.

"Under the pillow on the big bed in the other room."

"That's your brother's bed, isn't it?" Dugas asked Esteban.

Esteban turned to him and realization crossed his face as he said weakly, "Yes."

Shannon broke out the handcuffs.

"There's no need for that," Dugas said as he helped Esteban to his feet. "Summon a copper to take him to the station. We'll go find his brother."

Shannon led Esteban into the front room. Dugas leaned over and picked up the portrait of Rochelle Marais and carefully placed it on the chest of drawers. He noticed how the broken glass had nicked the line of Rochelle's chin. He removed the rest of the glass and set the print aside.

She was indeed beautiful.

Dugas felt something to his right and turned to face the wide chest and massive arms of Juan Esteban.

"Give me," Juan snarled.

Dugas fell back and bumped into Shannon, who had his revolver in hand.

"No!" a voice cried behind them.

Esteban tried to shove past and Shannon knocked him aside.

Juan looked at his brother and the hate left his eyes immediately. Tears streamed down his large face. Sobbing, he went down on his knees and sank back against the bed.

Dugas pulled out his pad and pencil and in a low voice asked Juan to tell him what happened. "Just tell me the truth," he told the big man.

Juan looked over at his brother and said pathetically, "I hurt Rochelle."

Esteban let out a faint cry

"I follow her," Juan said. "I tried to catch her but she wore those shoes that make her walk fast. I found a rope by the dock. I choked her."

"What else did you do?"

Meeting Dugas's gaze, he said, "I put her down."

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"What else?"

"I pull off those shoes and throw them in the river," he said, and then he began to rock back and forth and closed his eyes. He hummed a low-pitched tune. It sounded like something Dugas remembered from childhood, a childhood rhyme. The big man's lips moved. In a faint voice he said, "Pretty girl is dead. Pretty girl is dead. She choke herself on a rope. She don't run away no more. She don't run away no more." A tear rolled down his face.

"What about her locket?"

"I find it on the ground, and I pick it up."

Shannon reached across Dugas and snapped a cuff on Juan's left wrist. Dugas helped the big man up and guided his right hand to his back, where Shannon quickly manacled him.

"I'll send for a wagon," Shannon said.

And for a few minutes Dugas was alone with the brothers. He watched Esteban stare at the picture of Rochelle as if it had a mesmerizing quality, tracing her dark eyes and fine cheeks. The air was electric. Dugas felt his heart pounding.

Shannon came back in, leaned forward, and whispered in Dugas's ear, "How did you know?"

"I didn't. I had a feeling." Dugas patted his own stomach. "On the elemental level."

Esteban cleared his throat, and when Dugas turned to him said, "I don't believe it."

"Did you ever wonder how your brother knew?"

Esteban looked surprised.

"He was crying when he joined us yesterday, when we returned from the morgue. Remember? Who told him Rochelle was dead?"

Esteban's blue eyes dulled. He closed them and sank to the floor.

Shannon tapped Dugas on the shoulder and said, "What about the Sicilian?"

"I'd run too. Wouldn't you?"

Shannon rubbed his chin and said, "Yeah, I guess it ain't easy being a dago around here."

"Yeah," Dugas said quietly. "Who killa' da' chief, Joe? Who killa' da' chief?" ●

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BY JOHN HARVEY

Wayzgoose
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The Power of Suggestion
BY HELEN TUCKER

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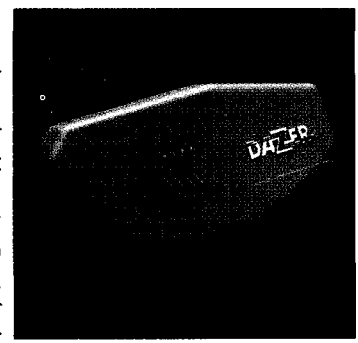

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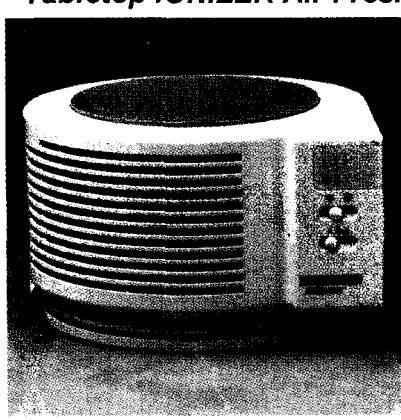

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